THE RANSOM FOR LONDON

J. S. FLETCHER

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PART 1

THE PRIME MINISTER'S WEEKEND

1

The Right Honourable Hildebrand Arthur Pontifex, P.C., M.P., First Lord of the Treasury and Prime Minister, was one of those products of modernity who cannot abide a weekend in London. During the session, every Saturday morning saw him depart from Downing Street; not seldom the departure was accomplished on Friday night. The Sunday newspapers duly announced that Mr Pontifex had left town; sometimes they chronicled his destination. More often they merely informed whomsoever it might concern that the Prime Minister was spending the weekend in the country.

Out of all Mr Pontifex's immense circle of acquaintance, social and official, there were very few people who really knew where his weekends were mostly spent. When he weekended with the Duke of This or the Earl of That, every Tom and Dick from Berwick to Penzance could learn the fact; when he slid quietly out of the immediate purview of things in his comfortable travelling car, his chauffeur needed no instructions as to destination, unless the visit was one of ceremony. Free of that ceremony, of his political cares and duties, the Prime Minister on these weekend holidays knew but one bourne for which his soul longed. The truth of the matter was that in a quiet corner of one of the most beautiful of the southern counties he had acquired a small estate, delightfully wooded, and furnished with a pretty house, which, if of very limited accommodation, was still large enough to provide quarters for the one or two exceedingly intimate friends whom he permitted to pass the portals of his Paradise. The name of this place was Somerbourne Manor; it lay seven miles from the nearest market-town and three from the nearest village; scarcely any of the people in the neighbourhood knew that the handsome, grey-haired gentleman, who came down in his motorcar so often for a night or two's stay, was the Prime Minister of

their Sovereign. To most of them he was simply a rich gentleman from London, who had a penchant for breeding prize cattle.

This was another fact about Mr Pontifex, which only his most intimate friends were aware of. Nobody who saw him walk out of Downing Street into Whitehall on his way to the House would ever have suspected him of bucolic tastes. He was said to be the best-dressed Premier we have ever had—which, while not saying a great deal, means much. He looked, thus viewed, exactly what he was—the archetype of the infinitely successful lawyer. Everybody knew Mr Pontifex's career. He had carried everything before him at Oxford; he had quickly built up a big practice and a great reputation at the Bar; he had entered the House of Commons at an early age, and had become a Cabinet Minister before he was thirty-five; he was Prime Minister at fifty. He was famous as a speaker of singular charm; he was known as a contributor to some of the reviews; he had a reputation as a bibliophile and a collector of old china. No one knowing these things—and knowing nothing else—would have suspected him of a love for breeding cattle. But that was Mr Pontifex's great hobby. Mr Gladstone loved to cut down trees; Mr Balfour delighted in golf; Mr Pontifex's heart leaped at the sight of his darlings in their model farm. It took twenty years off his age, he declared, to get down to Somerbourne Manor, to change into a suit of farmer-like tweeds, to stick an old cap on his head and a well-beloved briar between his teeth, and to go out, oblivious of dispatch boxes and Blue Books, into the kine-scented air of his fields.

It may be that Mr Pontifex loved his prize cattle as he did because he was not a man of any great family ties. His wife had been dead two years when a sudden re-shuffling of the political cards made him Premier, and all the family he had was one daughter, Lesbia, a young woman of one-and-twenty, who if neither handsome nor pretty, was innately attractive to both men and women, and if neither brilliant nor clever was endowed with good temper and common sense. Certain of her own sex, when Lesbia's father became Prime Minister, threw up their hands in horror and wondered what Hildebrand Pontifex would do with only Lesbia to preside over those functions which are more intimately connected with the vitality of a party than the unlearned in such matters know of. Lesbia settled that question in a fashion peculiarly her own. Mr Pontifex had always been celebrated at the Bar for his tact and resources; Lesbia, grown up, and placed in a position of almost as much delicacy as that of a football referee, speedily became fa-

mous as the most resourceful, tactful and managing young woman in London. There were not wanting people who said that the Prime Minister sought advice from his daughter which he would not seek from his Cabinet; however that may have been, it is quite certain that Lesbia Pontifex and her distinguished parent were on terms of camaraderie, which made life very pleasant to both of them.

At the time of the beginning of this chronicle Mr Pontifex and Lesbia had managed to escape from London by seven o'clock of a Friday evening, and the next morning found the Premier gloating over the prospect of two whole days of peace. He was strolling about his small pleasure grounds at ten o'clock on the Saturday morning, his favourite old cap on his head, his favourite old pipe in his mouth, when Lesbia joined him and slipped her hand through his arm.

'We are going to have a fine weekend,' she said meditatively.

'It seems to me,' said Mr Pontifex, who was staring hard at one of the flower beds, 'it seems to me, my dear, that some day we might have a little re-arrangement of this part of the grounds. Eh?'

'I like the grounds just as they are,' replied Lesbia. 'I do not think I would change them. I like to think that they are just as we found them when we first found this place. It has meant so much—to you.'

'I daresay you are right, my dear,' said Mr Pontifex. 'Yes—quite right, no doubt. Ah! I sometimes think, Lesbia, that when we go out, as go out we must in the natural order of things, that I shall retire altogether and settle down here. Eh?'

'No,' said Lesbia, firmly: 'Of course not! The idea of a man of fifty-two retiring! You will be Prime Minister at least three times before you are seventy. Then you may retire—perhaps.'

Mr Pontifex sat down on a rustic seat and filled his pipe.

'I suppose somebody's got to do it,' he said. Then, having blown forth several clouds of fragrant tobacco, he remarked, lazily, 'I'm glad there's only Jocelyn coming down this weekend, my dear—it is very soothing to have the place to oneself.'

Lesbia, who had been snipping early roses from the dwarf bushes close by, came to sit down at her father's side. She stroked his hand, taking at the same time a sly peep at him from under the wide brim of her garden hat.

'Father,' she said. 'I think—I think Jocelyn may have something to say to you.'

Mr Pontifex nodded his head mechanically. He was at times of an absent-minded tendency, and some of his political intimates said that on occasion he was dense. On this occasion he failed to see any particular shade of meaning in his daughter's tone.

'I daresay,' he said. 'Jocelyn generally has something to say to me. Jocelyn is, of all the young men of my acquaintance, the most talkative. It is fortunate that his conversation is intelligent and that he knows—usually—what he is talking about.'

'But, father,' said Lesbia, pulling one of her roses to pieces, 'I mean that Jocelyn may have something of a particular nature to say to you.'

The Premier moved uneasily in his seat.

'The last time that Jocelyn had anything of a particular nature to say to me,' he said, 'it related to some ridiculous mathematical problem about some farmers' wives going to market with so much money and living it out in certain directions. I was awake half the night trying to work it out.'

'I do not think it is a mathematical problem that Jocelyn wishes to speak to you about,' observed Lesbia.

'That,' said Mr Pontifex, 'is good to hear. I never cared much for problems—especially when I was Chancellor,' he added, with a quiet chuckle.

'At the same time, it is a problem about which Jocelyn wishes to speak,' said Lesbia.

Mr Pontifex continued to smoke placidly.

'Jocelyn,' he said, 'has an assimilative mind. He always seeks to know something, or wants a definite something.'

Lesbia pulled another rose to pieces.

'Yes,' she said meditatively, 'in this case he certainly wants a definite something. Father—Jocelyn wants me.'

The Prime Minister took his old pipe out of his mouth, and, turning his head slowly, stared at his daughter with incredulous eyes.

'God bless my soul, Lesbia!' he said. 'What are you talking about? Do you mean that—that Jocelyn Chenery wants—wants to marry you?'

Lesbia met his eyes with a calm and candid gaze and a slightly heightened colour.

'Yes, father,' she answered simply. 'He certainly does.'

Mr Pontifex plunged his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers, and rising to his feet began to pace up and down the gravelled path, biting hard at his pipe. The Honourable Jocelyn Chenery, a lively and pushing young

gentleman of five-and-twenty, had been one of his unpaid private secretaries for eighteen months, and had naturally had the run of the houses which domiciled the father and daughter, but Mr Pontifex had never thought of anything so abstract and far off as love between the two young people. He felt more at a loss than if he had suddenly been presented with an ultimatum from the German Chancellory.

'And—and you, Lesbia?' he asked, stopping suddenly in front of his daughter. 'And you?'

Lesbia regarded the roses with much attention.

'I am very fond of Jocelyn, father,' she answered, suddenly looking up and regarding him with eyes which in a quick flash of memory reminded him of her mother.

'God bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr Pontifex. 'Dear me!'

He took two or three more turns about the path before he came back to his daughter and laid his hand on her shoulder. When she looked up she instinctively put her hand on his.

'Well, well, my dear,' he said, 'we must think—we must think. I confess I am quite taken aback. Besides, Jocelyn is a mere boy! However—um, dear me, what strange things do occur! Now, my dear, I think I will walk over to the farm. Bless me, it's getting on to eleven—Jermey will have been expecting me this half-hour!'

Therewith the Prime Minister seized an ashplant stick and hurried away, and Lesbia went singing into the house.

2

The Model farm which so completely housed Mr Pontifex's prize cattle lay across the park, at a distance of about a mile from the Manor. Mr Pontifex took the nearest way to it, going straight over the grass, quite careless of the fact that the morning dew was still there, and that he himself was predisposed to rheumatism. The fact was that he was somewhat upset by the news which his daughter had just given him. It was the first time that the possibility of Lesbia's marriage had really presented itself to him; he had always known, of course, that she would be likely to marry some day, but that some day had been a vague and nebulous thing, far off. Like a good many other fathers who have a lot to do in the world, Mr Pontifex had scarcely realised that his daughter was as old as she really was; although he turned to her for advice, and largely depended upon her to play hostess for him, he still thought of her as he had thought of her when she was in short skirts and had her hair down—she was his child, and not some young woman eligible for marriage. Well, of course, he thought as he walked along, he had been an old ass—Lesbia was, yes, must be twenty-one, and it was only natural. But Jocelyn Chenery!—he confessed to himself that he had never thought of Master Jocelyn as a prospective son-in-law, never!

If there was anything that Mr Pontifex disliked it was to be asked to think deeply when he came down to Somerbourne Manor. He was bound to think now, however, and he chafed under the obligation. Of course, there was nothing to be said against Jocelyn Chenery. It was quite true that he was a younger son, but the old Earl of Hadminstowe was a very rich man, and Jocelyn was better off than plenty of peers. He was clever, too, Jocelyn—perhaps a bit too much so—and would before long be in the House, and he was bright, and amusing, and full of life and energy, and—

‘I suppose these things will happen,’ muttered Mr Pontifex, stopping under a beech tree to relight his pipe, which he had allowed to go out. ‘I suppose they really will happen. And I won’t think any more about it until I have spoken to Jocelyn myself. There’s Jermey looking out for me and wondering why I’m not punctual.’

The individual to whom the Prime Minister referred was a thick-set, ruddy-faced person, who was walking up and down before the shrubbery which closed in the model farm, attired in garments pretty much like those affected by his master. He grinned widely as Mr Pontifex approached, and made evident his pleasure at his coming. In another moment the Premier was talking cattle.

Some of Mr Pontifex’s secretaries, past and future, had been known to say that the great man erred on the side of over-scrupulousness as regards order and system—they considered him ‘faddy.’ If they had seen the model farm they would have beheld system, order, neatness and cleanliness reduced to the superlative point of perfection. Mr Pontifex had designed the buildings himself; they had been erected under his personal supervision. Jermey, his man-in-charge, said there were no such buildings anywhere in England; on a small scale there certainly were not. Their owner did not wish to cultivate his hobby to a great extent—quality before quantity was his motto. There were never more than twenty cattle on the premises, but they were stalled and folded and tended as if they were the favourites of an Eastern monarch.

Mr Pontifex’s great fancy in cattle was for Herefords. He had a remarkably fine breed, and had won more cups and silver and suchlike affairs than any man in England. Just now there were some particularly valuable animals at the farm; he moved amongst them, the faithful Jermey at his side, talking to them as if they had been human beings. He prodded their flanks, punched their backs, scratched their ears and their muzzles, and showed himself kindly interested in their bovine affairs. He went all over the place, noting everything with keen pleasure; he accompanied Jermey to his house and drank a glass of new milk; during the whole two hours which he spent at the farm he thought of nothing but cattle, and food-stuffs, and the desirability of entering at this or that show; when he left and set out homewards for lunch the cobwebs of the week were thoroughly cleared out of his brain.

In going back to the Manor from the farm Mr Pontifex invariably took a path which led through a pleasant ravine, wherein were a murmuring

stream, lichened rocks, some rare ferns and a rustic seat, on which he usually sat for half an hour or so. As some time was still to elapse before lunch when he reached the seat, and as the noontide was singularly warm and bright, the Premier, on arriving at this favourite coign of vantage, sat down and admired the brown pools at his feet, in which he could see the speckled trout playing. About that point of the ravine everything was very quiet. He was accordingly somewhat startled when he heard a man's voice, quiet, cultured and deep, suddenly say:

'Good morning, Mr Pontifex!'

The Premier turned sharply in the direction from which the voice came. He saw, standing a yard or two behind him, a tall, rather powerfully-built man, moustached and bearded, who was attired in the knickerbocker suit usually worn by cyclists, and who at that moment was lifting his cap from his head with a politeness which suggested a foreign origin. Indeed, Mr Pontifex, who had travelled a great deal on the Continent, immediately set the intruder down as a Frenchman—his dark hair and eyes, his olive complexion and his semi-theatrical bow seemed to indicate a Gallic strain. The Premier felt annoyed; never since he had come into possession of Somerbourne Manor had his privacy been intruded upon, and he could not imagine how this stranger could have made his way to that part of the estate. There was an air of hauteur in his response to the polite salutation.

'Good morning, sir. I—er—think that you are not aware that you are trespassing on private property,' observed Mr Pontifex, acidly. 'There is no right-of-way here.'

The stranger bowed again. He also smiled, showing a set of very white and even teeth, something in the sight of which the Prime Minister did not like. They reminded him of something—yes, it was of Mephistopheles in the play.

'I am quite aware that I am upon your private estate, Mr Pontifex,' he replied. 'That, of course, is exactly where I expected to find you this morning.'

The Prime Minister stared at this unwelcome intruder in wonder; the intruder returned his stare with smiling coolness.

'I must say, sir, that you are taking an unwarrantable liberty,' said Mr Pontifex, with cold anger, 'and I must ask you to withdraw at once.'

Instead of obeying the peremptory command the stranger only smiled again, and drawing a silver case from his vest pocket he selected a cigarette

and slowly lighted it.

'I can scarcely, in justice to myself, withdraw until I have done my business with you, Mr Pontifex,' he said. 'You yourself will admit that business must be done under any circumstances.'

Business! Was the man, then, some petitioner, some crank with a grievance, some one or other of the hundred of this sort who were always tormenting him? Mr Pontifex's soul groaned within him.

'I transact no business here, sir,' he said sharply. 'If you have business with me, be good enough to address me in the usual way, through the post.'

With that Mr Pontifex rose, bowed with haughty dignity, and made as if to pursue his path towards the Manor. But the stranger, still wearing that exasperating and inscrutable smile, placed himself in the path and held up a forefinger, which he wagged.

'Not yet, Mr Pontifex, not yet!' he said firmly, though very gently. 'I repeat, not yet.'

Mr Pontifex's anger grew higher. He grasped his ashplant as if he felt—as indeed he did—a hearty inclination to use it.

'How, sir!' he exclaimed. 'You dare to bar my way on my own ground? Stand aside, sir, this moment! By what right—'

The stranger stepped back a pace, and opening his tweed jacket tapped the butt end of a revolver, which was placed, barrel downwards, in one of his waistcoat pockets.

'The force superior!' he said, smiling again. 'Come, Mr Pontifex, be a sensible man and sit down for a few minutes. It is absolutely necessary that I should have a short personal interview with you, and this is the time and place. I give you my word of honour that as soon as I have said my say I will go, and you can then continue your homeward walk. Make a virtue of necessity and yield with good grace.'

During this adjuration the Prime Minister had been thinking. He recognised that he was in a tight hole. He was a long way from Jermey and his men; he was further away from the Manor. Nobody ever came through that ravine; the path led to nowhere in particular. He was at the man's mercy. And he sat down again, and folding his hands over the top of his stick looked steadily at his assailant.

Mr Pontifex knew what it was to be in danger. For a whole year, during his famous Home Secretaryship, he had been watched night and day by detectives; once, at the time he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had been

obliged to have personal police protection for several weeks. He had several times had the windows of his carriage broken, and twice been personally assaulted. He had no fear about his present predicament; he was only wondering whether the man was bad or mad. And in reseating himself he addressed the stranger quite calmly.

'It is quite true, sir, that you have the advantage of me—in more ways than one,' he said dryly. 'And therefore I must listen to you whether I would or would not. May I beg you to say what you have to say to me as quickly and briefly as possible, and then to allow me to leave you?'

The stranger blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke and thoughtfully watched it float away into the light tracery of the trees above them. He took a seat at the other end of the bench on which the Prime Minister was sitting.

'I know you to be a man of common sense, Mr Pontifex,' he said. 'That is your reputation throughout the world.'

'Spare me any compliments, I beg, sir,' said the Prime Minister. 'You were about to say—?'

'I was about to say that I will say what I have to say in such succinct terms as will make my demand clear to you,' answered the stranger.

'Ah, you have a demand, then?' involuntarily exclaimed Mr Pontifex, unable to suppress a little ironical laugh. 'May I ask what the demand is?'

The stranger flicked off his cigarette and turned a cold and stern glance on his unwilling listener.

'Yes,' he replied. 'It is a peremptory demand for the sum of ten millions.'

3

Mr Pontifex was now quite certain that he had to deal with a madman, and it seemed to him that the best way to treat madmen is to temporise with them and to speak in a non-irritating manner. He therefore smiled again—this time in his blandest fashion, cultivated at the Bar for the express benefit of ladies and doubtful witnesses—and spoke in his most dulcet tone of voice.

'Ten millions of money!' he said. 'That is a large sum.'

'A comfortable sum,' rejoined the other, 'and under the circumstances a reasonable sum.'

'The circumstances, eh?' said Mr Pontifex. 'Ah, yes, there must be circumstances, of course. Circumstances to lead up to the demand, naturally. Let me see—what did you say the demand was for?'

The stranger gave him a sharp glance.

'I have not said what the demand was for,' he replied coldly. 'I was about to tell you. It is ransom—ransom for London.'

The Prime Minister's eyebrows rose.

'Ransom for London!' he repeated. 'I—really, I do not understand you at all.'

The stranger gave him another sharp glance.

'I believe, Mr Pontifex,' he said, more icily than before, 'I believe you are by way of thinking me insane?'

Mr Pontifex blushed involuntarily and was obviously confused. He waved a deprecating hand.

'That is what you think,' continued the stranger, producing and lighting another cigarette. 'Well, I daresay you have grounds—it must seem the act of a mad-man to suddenly demand ten millions sterling. But before you

have heard all I have to say, Mr Pontifex, you will find that I have an infinitude of cool, clear reason on my side.'

'I am waiting,' said Mr Pontifex, 'to hear what you have to say.'

The stranger made one of his half-theatrical bows.

'We will come to business then,' he said. 'Mr Pontifex, I am one of three men who hold the safety of London in their hands. I speak no idle words when I say this. If it is our will we can sweep away the seven million inhabitants of your great city as easily as I blow away the ashes from this cigarette, and no man can either prevent us or know how our work is accomplished. Accordingly, London must be ransomed. Our price is ten million pounds sterling—a sum which to so rich a city is no more than a half-crown is to you. We could demand more—we ask this sum not to enrich ourselves, but because we need it for scientific purposes.'

Mr Pontifex sat in the attitude in which he received deputations—with bent head, pursed lips and folded hands. He was becoming more and more certain that his companion was a hopeless lunatic, and he wished the interview well over, or that some of his people might chance to come along.

'To destroy seven millions of people at one fell swoop would appear to be a task of some magnitude,' he observed.

The stranger smiled.

'Mr Pontifex,' he said quietly, 'do you know anything of chemistry?'

'Theoretically, a little; practically, nothing,' answered Mr Pontifex. 'That is, except the chemical values of certain food-stuffs for cattle.'

'That, of course, you would naturally know,' said the stranger, with a polite bow in the direction of the model farm, in which safe harbour the Prime Minister was just then devoutly wishing himself at rest. 'Well, Mr Pontifex, has it ever occurred to you to try to think what a few determined—and, if you like to put it so,—unscrupulous men, highly trained in the art of chemistry, could do in the way of conducting a war of their own against—shall we say, Society?'

'I am afraid that such a thought has not occurred to me,' replied Mr Pontifex, with emphasis on the negative.

'Let it occur now, then,' said the stranger. 'I wonder that to a man of your undoubted ability—though, to be sure, you are merely an able man and not a genius—such a thought never did occur. Mr Pontifex, the warfare of the future will be conducted not by soldiers, but by chemists! Your chemist, in

his laboratory, can do more actual harm in the way of slaying men and of devastating cities than all the Army Corps of Europe massed together.'

Mr Pontifex stirred uneasily in his seat. This talk of slaying and devastating was scarcely palatable. Besides, he wanted his lunch. And suddenly a brilliant notion struck him. He was now absolutely certain that the man was stark, staring mad—how would it be to cajole him up to the Manor and hand him over to the men-servants?'

'What you say, sir,' he said, in his blandest manner, 'is doubtless of the greatest interest. It also relates to a subject on which much is to be said. Suppose you walk up to my house and take a little lunch with—'

A cold, hard look on his companion's face froze the next words ere they found Mr Pontifex's lips.

'I have already told you that I am quite sane, Mr Pontifex,' he said. 'It is no use trifling with me. Perhaps I had better come to the point.'

'If you will be so good,' said the Prime Minister, with a groan.

'Briefly, then,' continued the stranger. 'My two associates and myself hold the lives of the population of London in our hands. We can at will destroy a hundred, or a hundred thousand, or the entire city. The price of ransom is ten millions sterling. Are you, as Prime Minister, prepared to pay?'

'May I ask you how, in case I am prepared to pay, you propose to take over so large a sum?' inquired the Prime Minister, caustically. 'A transaction involving ten millions sterling can scarcely be a hole-and-corner affair.'

The stranger waved his hand.

'The details of payment can easily be arranged,' he answered. 'The question to be answered is—Will you pay?'

'The resources and wealth of this country, sir, are not my private property to dispose of,' replied Mr Pontifex.

'The power lies in your hands,' said the stranger.

'Moreover,' said Mr Pontifex, 'I do not know that you and your friends possess this terrible power of which you speak—a power which, I must confess, I feel decidedly sceptical about.'

The stranger showed those white teeth again. Mr Pontifex felt an inward shudder and hoped he betrayed no outward sign of it.

'Quite so,' said the stranger. 'Quite so. It will, of course, be necessary to give you a foretaste.'

'Of what, sir?' demanded the Prime Minister.

‘Of our power, Mr Pontifex,’ replied the stranger. ‘Our power to deal out at our pleasure swift, sudden, unseen death.’

‘Umph!’ said Mr Pontifex. He moved impatiently in his seat, and the stranger rose.

‘I think there is no particular need to detain you longer, Mr Pontifex,’ he said. ‘You now have our ultimatum. You shall have a foretaste—perhaps two foretastes—of our power. After the second I think you will be glad to pay the ransom. We will instruct you as to what you are to do in that case. But—you are bottom dog, Mr Pontifex.’

The man’s calm assurance, his studiously polite insolence, made the Prime Minister lose his temper. He banged the ground with his stick, forgot his own opinions as to the stranger’s sanity, and ceased to remember the existence of the revolver.

‘Confound your insolence, sir!’ he said. ‘You trespass upon my private ground, you detain me here by force, you oblige me to listen to a cock-and-bull story! I shall follow you and have you arrested, sir. I shall—’

‘No, no, Mr Pontifex, you will do nothing of the sort,’ interrupted the stranger. ‘You see, I should not allow it. There is no danger to me, Mr Pontifex—we never deal in risks. I am so carefully and skilfully disguised that if you passed me half-an-hour hence in Pall Mall, or met me in the smoking room of your favourite club (as you often have done, Mr Pontifex—yes, it’s true, though you stare so at the news), you would not know me.’

Mr Pontifex’s temper died out. But he continued to stare.

‘My club? Disguise?’ he exclaimed. ‘Is—are you—is this some practical joke? Are you—dressed up, eh?’

‘I am certainly dressed up and disguised, Mr Pontifex,’ replied the stranger, ‘but this is no practical joke. This is the real thing. I and my two associates demand ten millions sterling from London for ransom. We do not care who pays it. The Treasury can pay it, if you like. The City can pay it, if the City likes. We come to you as the intermediary. We could have written our ultimatum to you, but I preferred to see you personally. Now I am going, Mr Pontifex. It is useless to try to follow me. Besides, I know this ravine far better than you, its proprietor, do. You will be pleased to remain seated where you are for the space of exactly two minutes—take out your watch, if you please—and after that you may resume your walk. Good morning, Mr Pontifex—and remember!’

With that the mysterious stranger, stepping back into the thick brushwood, disappeared as mysteriously as he had come, leaving the Prime Minister to stare helplessly at the watch which he had mechanically withdrawn from his pocket. Mr Pontifex was so much amazed that he allowed quite five minutes to elapse before he came to his full senses and started to his feet.

'Mad!' he exclaimed. 'Raving mad! At least not raving—but mad all the same. Dear me! what an unpleasant experience! I must really talk to Jermey and see what we can do to keep strangers out of the park. Disguised, eh? I wonder where he is now? Watching me, very likely. Most unpleasant!'

With these and sundry other exclamations and speculations Mr Pontifex made his way along the ravine into the park. By the time he had reached the Manor he had come to the conclusion that the stranger was an escaped lunatic from the neighbouring county town, where there was a large asylum, and his mind became much easier.

Lesbia met him in the hall with a telegram in her hand.

'Jocelyn can't come today, father,' she said. 'But he'll be here for breakfast tomorrow morning. You look pale, dear—what's the matter?'

'I think I walked rather too far,' replied Mr Pontifex, putting aside his ashplant. 'Williamson shall get me a little brandy.'

He revived with the brandy, and subsequently with lunch, and during the rest of the day rested, pottering about the grounds and the gardens with Lesbia. He went early to bed and slept well, only to be suddenly awakened at six o'clock in the morning by his man Williamson. Behind Williamson, on the threshold of the bedroom, trembling and shaking, stood Jermey.

'God bless me!' exclaimed Mr Pontifex, sitting up in bed. 'What is the matter?'

'Oh, Mr Pontifex, sir!' said Jermey. 'The cattle, sir, the cattle!'

'What of them?' demanded Mr Pontifex. 'Speak, man, speak!'

'Dead, sir, dead! Dead, every one of 'em—as dead as doornails!'

And Jermey burst into tears and lamentations.

4

If a messenger had suddenly arrived from London to tell him that the reigning Sovereign had been deposed and a Republic established, Mr Pontifex could scarcely have been more surprised than he was by this abrupt announcement on the part of his farm-bailiff. He remained sitting up in bed staring at the disconsolate Jermey pretty much as Priam doubtless stared at the messenger who brought him ill news of Troy—that is to say, he stared in utter amazement and silence. It was a full minute before he found his voice—it sounded very unreal and a long way off.

'What did he say, Williamson?' said the voice, as Mr Pontifex gazed blankly at his man. 'What did he say?'

'He says, sir, as how all the cattle's dead,' replied Williamson, gravely. 'Every one of 'em, sir.'

'Every single one on 'em!' moaned Jermey. 'There ain't a blessed one on 'em left alive. Old and young—which there weren't no particular old 'uns, nor yet any particular young 'uns—all's gone. It's a visitation—that's what it is, like what you read about in the Bible. Right as robins they were last night—I went round 'em myself, last thing. Yes, at nine-thirty that were. And now corpses—a-lying side by side. And as dead as—as ever they can be.'

'Take Jermey downstairs and give him a little brandy, Williamson,' said Mr Pontifex. 'I will come down presently and hear what he has to say. Don't arouse Miss Pontifex.'

But at that moment Miss Pontifex's voice was heard in the corridor, demanding information. She was an early riser, especially in the country, and she had caught the sound of Jermey's lamentations.

'Whatever is the matter?' she asked through the half-open door. 'Has anything happened?'

‘Wait a moment, my dear, and I will join you in the morning-room,’ said the Prime Minister. ‘Take Jermey there, Williamson.’

He got out of bed when the men had gone, and putting a thick dressing gown over his pyjamas, and thrusting his feet into his bedroom slippers, went down to the morning-room. There he found Lesbia, also in a dressing gown staring incredulously at the farm-bailiff, to whom Williamson, preternaturally solemn of face, was administering old brandy out of a decanter. Lesbia turned astonished eyes to her father as he entered.

‘Jermey says all the cattle are dead!’ she exclaimed.

‘So I understand,’ said Mr Pontifex. ‘I confess I can scarcely credit it, scarcely believe that I am awake. Are you sure of what you say, Jermey? Sure?’

Jermey, coughing from the effects of the brandy, shook his head violently, and made pantomimic gestures.

‘Sure!’ he exclaimed, betraying a semi-hysterical disposition to laugh. ‘Sure! Wish I was as sure of a fortune as I am of them there beasts’ death. I see ’em—all of ’em. They’re all lying in their stalls, as dead as Christians. Two-and-twenty on ’em, laid out as if they were asleep. Dead? Oh, yes, they’re dead, is them. Oh, dead, dear!’

‘But what is it?’ asked Lesbia. ‘What’s killed them?’

Jermey went through more violent head-shaking.

‘It’s a visitation, that’s what it is,’ he said. ‘Must ha’ been, because they were all as right as trivets last night. Me and my son, George Albert, after we’d had our supper, which was a bit after nine o’clock, he says to me that we’d have a look round together. We went through both sheds, me and George Albert did, and all was as peaceful as what we are just now, Mr Pontifex, sir. All breathing nice and quiet, and a-blinking at George Albert’s lantern like so many babbies in their cradles. And this morning, me getting up early ’cause I couldn’t sleep no more, lo and behold! when I went to have a look at ’em, they was all gone! Not one of ’em left alive—not even old bull Caesar, which you’d ha’ thought nothing but a earthquake could ha’ killed him. Lor’ a-mercy!—the turn it give me!’

‘But are there no signs of anything, Jermey?’ asked Mr Pontifex. ‘I suppose the place was locked up, wasn’t it?’

‘The place was locked up, sir, and the keys hung where I always hang ’em, at the head of my bed,’ answered Jermey. ‘And as for signs, there weren’t a sign nowheres. Everything was in apple-pie order, same as when

me and George Albert left it last night. Looked just the same, did sheds and stalls, 'ceptin' that all the beasts was taken above or wheresomever they go. It's a visitation—that's what it is, Mr Pontifex, sir, a visitation.'

'Well, I will finish dressing and come across, Jermey,' said the Prime Minister. 'Don't allow a single thing to be touched until I come. Lesbia, perhaps Williamson might get in some coffee and toast in, say, half an hour, and we can breakfast when we return—I thought you might like to go across to the farm with me.'

'Yes,' answered Lesbia. 'I'll go, father. You can finish dressing—I'll see about the coffee.'

Mr Pontifex went upstairs again, sorely perplexed. He had been very sound asleep when Williamson awoke him, but his brain was clearing now. And as he turned into his dressing room the full significance of the tragic fate of his beloved cattle smote upon his consciousness and made him gasp for breath and clutch the nearest chair.

This was the first manifestation of the awful power of the Three!

There could be no doubt about that. Swift, sudden, unseen Death! That was what the mysterious stranger had threatened—that, according to Jermey, was what had come to the poor cattle. They had been well, safe, happy in their bovine way, last night—this morning they were dead. Mr Pontifex shuddered as he thought of the full significance of this affair.

'Good heavens!' he said to himself. 'If it really is so—if it really is so!'

All the time he was dressing he was thinking of this awful thing which had suddenly been placed before him, a crimson menace. He now no longer thought of the stranger as a madman. He remembered his calm assurance, his sinister glance as he promised to give him, Mr Pontifex, a foretaste of the power wielded by himself and his associates. A foretaste—no, he had said two foretastes. This had been on the brute creation, on poor, defenceless, dumb beasts—what if the next were on human beings, who, after all, would be equally defenceless? Mr Pontifex felt himself horribly, terribly afraid—afraid with the worst kind of fear, the fear of the unknown and unseen—at the mere thought.

'This has upset you, father,' said Lesbia when he went down and found her waiting for him with coffee and hot toast.

'Yes,' replied Mr Pontifex, 'yes. I am naturally upset. I cannot understand the matter so far. Yesterday the cattle were quite well—quite well, and in splendid condition.'

‘They must have been poisoned,’ said Lesbia, in a matter-of-fact voice. ‘That’s the only thing I can think of. It is the only thing. Of course they’ve been poisoned, father.’

‘From Jermey’s account,’ observed Mr Pontifex, taking his coffee cup, ‘they appear to have died simultaneously. If it had been a case of poisoning—’

‘But it must have been poison,’ said Lesbia. ‘What else could it be, possibly?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Mr Pontifex.

Lesbia looked at her father wonderingly. She had never seen him look so concerned, so grave before—not even at the time of the fateful crisis through which the Government had passed in the previous year. She watched him for a moment in silence.

‘You have no suspicion of anything, father?’ she said presently.

‘I, my dear? No—I have no suspicion,’ replied Mr Pontifex. ‘I—but if you are ready we will go across the park.’

Neither father nor daughter made further reference to the night’s occurrence until they reached the model farm. There they encountered Jermey and George Albert, together with the three men employed on the farm, who, in their Sunday best, looked as mournful and annoyed as the Jermeys themselves.

‘Now, Jermey, let me see the sheds,’ said Mr Pontifex. ‘I understand that nothing has been touched since the discovery was made this morning?’

‘Not a straw’s been touched, sir, and only this door’s been unlocked, and I haven’t been in again since I came back from the Manor,’ said the bailiff, producing his keys. ‘George Albert and these men, sir, they ain’t a-seen of the poor beasts’ corpses yet. And sure I am it’s like one o’ them mort’ry places what they lays dead bodies in, sir, Mr Pontifex—I never thought to see such a sight in my born days,’ concluded Jermey, unlocking a door and standing aside to allow his master and Lesbia to enter. ‘I don’t know how you’ll stand it, miss—it makes me worse than a child.’

Mr Pontifex and Lesbia passed inside the building with Jermey at their heels; George Albert and the three men followed at a respectful distance. The footsteps of the whole party sounded strangely loud in the utter silence. Mr Pontifex thought of his visit of the previous day, of the gentle murmurs of the contented cattle, of the rattling of the chains which held them to their stalls, of the cheerful bustle of the workmen moving about the cake-mill

and the hay-chamber, and he felt a certain moisture steal into his eyes. As for Lesbia, she felt as if she had walked into a death chamber.

The unfortunate cattle lay on each side of them, dead as doornails, as Jermey had said. Each lay in practically the same position—on its side, as if it had suddenly collapsed and instantly died. There were no traces in any case of any struggle—the poor beasts were just stretched out, dead. So far as could be judged from their appearance death had been instantaneous.

The little party passed up one shed and down another, and out into the open air again. Mr Pontifex drew out a handkerchief and cleaned his spectacles. He began to ask questions—nobody knew anything. Neither Jermey nor George Albert, who lived in the yard, had heard a sound during the night; there were three dogs on the premises and none of them had barked. As for the three men, they all lived in the village some distance away, and had left for their homes at six o'clock the previous evening.

There was a telephone in Jermey's house, and by Mr Pontifex's instructions George Albert telephoned to the market-town to request the attendance of a veterinary surgeon. And then, after some cogitation, Mr Pontifex himself telephoned to London, asking to be put on to Scotland Yard. That done, he rejoined his daughter, and having instructed Jermey to lock up the sheds again until the veterinary surgeon arrived, he and Lesbia walked silently back to the Manor.

'There has been foul play, father,' said Lesbia at last.

'Yes,' said Mr Pontifex, quietly. 'Foul play—foul play.'

A motorcar was running up the drive as they approached the house; Lesbia's colour rose.

'That's Jocelyn'; she exclaimed. 'He said he'd be here for breakfast.'

5

Greatly to Miss Pontifex's amazement Mr Jocelyn Chenery was not driving the car; it became evident in another moment, indeed, that he was in no position to do so, for he stepped out with his right hand and wrist bandaged, and in a sling, and had obviously been in the wars. The Prime Minister stared at his secretary in wonder.

'Oh, Jocelyn, what has happened?' cried Lesbia, as the young man came across the lawn to meet them. 'An accident?'

'Nothing, nothing, I assure you,' replied Jocelyn, hastily, offering his left hand. 'A little adventure in the Park yesterday—I'll tell you about it afterwards. How are you, Lesbia, and how are you, sir, and why are we out so very early this fine morning? And, now I look more closely, you both look very grave.'

The Prime Minister coughed. Jocelyn Chenery knew that cough—he had heard it so often. It was the cough with which Mr Pontifex usually prefaced his answer to deputations, or a decision on some momentous question, and it signified that the task before him was distasteful. He stole another glance at his chief's face and saw that something had happened.

'Jocelyn,' said Lesbia, 'we have had a terrible disaster. All the prize cattle are dead.'

Jocelyn looked at her in amazement.

'What—suddenly?' he exclaimed.

'Last night,' replied Lesbia, 'they were, according to Jermey, as right as robins; this morning they were as dead as doornails. There has been foul play on somebody's part.'

Jocelyn stared at Mr Pontifex.

'I am very sorry, sir,' he said. 'But—is there no clue, no explanation?'

'None,' answered Lesbia. 'It is a mystery.'

They walked on a few yards in silence. Then Mr Pontifex spoke. 'I think we will have breakfast before we talk more about cattle,' he said. 'Perhaps after breakfast I may tell you of an occurrence of yesterday. This is a very strange and mysterious affair, Chenery—I do not quite realise its full importance as yet.'

He passed into the house, leaving Jocelyn and Lesbia on the terrace. With a mutual impulse they turned away together towards the rose garden.

'What does he mean?' asked Jocelyn.

'I don't know,' answered Lesbia. 'Naturally he's terribly upset. I think there is something—he has been so preoccupied. Now, Jocelyn, what is the matter with your hand, or your wrist, or whatever it is?'

'Dog bite,' replied Jocelyn, laconically.

'A dog bite! You don't mean that you're in danger of hydrophobia!' exclaimed Lesbia.

'I don't think anybody ever gets hydrophobia nowadays,' said Jocelyn, struggling with his cigarette case. 'Besides, this particular dog was clean and healthy enough. He didn't mean to bite me.'

'Then why did he bite you?' asked Lesbia. 'Here, give me your matchbox—you can't get a light with one hand. There!—now, why did he bite you?'

'It was in the Green Park,' answered Jocelyn. 'Yesterday morning, just as I was crossing, on my way home. There was a girl in front who had a chow—rather a good chow, too; the chow and some more dogs got mixed up in a scrap, and the girl screamed. I went to the chow's rescue, and as it was a sort of regular mêlée I got a casual flesh wound from a dog who seemed to have had his teeth newly ground. That's all.'

'Where's the wound?' asked Lesbia.

Jocelyn indicated the fleshy part of his right thumb.

'Of course you had it cauterised at once?' said Lesbia.

Jocelyn made a grimace.

'Hurt?' said Lesbia.

'Much less agreeable than the bite,' replied Jocelyn.

'And the chow lady?' said Lesbia.

'Turned out to be an Italian signorina, full of voluble thanks and lamentations at my gory wounds. I've got her card somewhere, and her uncle's,' said Jocelyn, feeling in his waistcoat pocket. 'Here you are—

Il Signor Pietro Vespucci—Il Signorina Pepita Vespucci. Sounds like an opera programme.'

'St John's Wood,' murmured Lesbia, looking at the address on the highly-glazed cards. 'Perhaps he's an artist, Signor Vespucci.'

'No, he's a scientist, a savant,' said Jocelyn. 'No end of a clever sort of chap, according to his pretty niece.'

'Oh, so you talked to her?' said Lesbia.

'We walked up the Park to Piccadilly together,' replied Jocelyn. 'Then I made tracks for the nearest doctor. I think I promised to call—just to let her know that I haven't developed hydrophobia. Lesbia, I'm awfully hungry!'

Lesbia steered him round towards the breakfast-room.

'I told father yesterday, Jocelyn,' she said suddenly.

'Um?' said Jocelyn.

'I think he was greatly astonished,' she said.

Jocelyn nodded with an air of comprehending wisdom.

'Yes,' he said. 'Ye-es. They always are. It's a curious thing, but it's true, that when a man becomes a father of a real live daughter he makes up his mind that she's going to continue in an infantile state all the rest of her life. I expect I shall be like that too when I have a daughter. It's human nature.'

'Well, don't speak to him until he has got over this strange affair of the cattle,' said Lesbia.

'This strange affair of the cattle is indeed a strange affair,' observed Jocelyn, shaking his head. 'I'm all agog to hear what your father may be pleased to tell us.'

Mr Pontifex was very quiet during breakfast. Neither Lesbia nor Jocelyn Chenery could remember him in such a non-conversational vein. Usually he expanded when he was at Somerbourne Manor and chattered with the irresponsibility of a boy let loose. But on this particular morning his conversation was chiefly monosyllabic, and the younger people, both of them given to talking a good deal, felt damped by his presence; there was a distinct atmosphere of restraint over the breakfast-table, and all three felt relieved when the meal was over.

'Come into the garden, you two,' said Mr Pontifex, who lighted a cigar instead of a pipe, a sure sign that he was perturbed and full of thought. 'I have something to tell you, and we shall be quieter there.'

Lesbia and Jocelyn followed the Prime Minister to the seat which Mr Pontifex and his daughter had occupied just twenty-four hours before.

And there, while they listened in silence, he told them without reserve the full story of his encounter with the mysterious stranger.

As that story began, Jocelyn Chenery, who was a sharp-witted young man, conceived the notion which Mr Pontifex himself had at first conceived—that the stranger was mad. But as the story progressed he began to think differently, and before his chief had finished his narrative he was speculating with set mouth and knitted brow on the awful eventualities which might be attendant on the possession of such a power as that of which the stranger had spoken. Both Lesbia and he preserved a strict silence until the Prime Minister had made an end.

'And there it is,' said Mr Pontifex, in conclusion, casting away the end of his cigar and producing another. 'I treated the thing as a madman's freak, but after the event of the night I fear we are face to face with something—well, terrible. I have no doubt whatever that this man and his associates have by some mysterious means killed my cattle; if they can do that, what can they not do to human beings? "Sudden, swift, unseen death!" the man said. Well, yonder it is, and not the less awful because it is a few dumb animals who are struck down. We are, I say, face to face with—Terror. What do you think, Chenery?'

Jocelyn shook his head.

'If all this is true, sir,' he replied, 'we are indeed face to face with the most awful form of Terror. You are sure that there is no natural explanation of the death of the cattle?'

Mr Pontifex, who had risen and was pacing up and down in front of the seat, his head thrust forward and his hands plunged in his trousers pockets, smiled grimly.

'I don't think anybody in the whole annals of stock-breeding ever heard of two-and-twenty healthy animals dying in what one may term a lump, Chenery,' he said. 'No—there's been nothing natural about the death of the poor beasts, I can swear. They were murdered—murdered just as these infernal scoundrels have the power to murder—us.'

'Father, it must have been some subtle form of poison,' suggested Lesbia.

'That, my dear, we can ascertain, I suppose,' said Mr Pontifex. 'I made Jermey's son telephone for Marchant, the veterinary surgeon, from Stowminster; he ought to be here soon. And I telephoned to Scotland Yard, asking them to send Marillier here at once. I have great faith in Marillier.'

'But what good can Marillier do, father?' asked Lesbia.

Mr Pontifex regarded the ash at the end of the cigar with an air of superior wisdom.

'People may disguise themselves as cleverly as they please, my dear,' he said, 'but however effective the disguise may be they cannot hope to avoid some notice. The man who confronted me yesterday must have been seen by someone in the neighbourhood, and I want Marillier to institute inquiries. This man may have spent the preceding night about here; if it was he who poisoned the cattle he must have been here last night. Personally, although he said he was disguised and dressed up I am somewhat inclined to doubt both statements. If he was disguised it was the cleverest make-up I have ever seen. I looked most carefully at his beard, his moustache, his hair. Not Clarkson himself, I think, could have so disguised a man. No, I think that was a piece of what is vulgarly termed, I believe, bluff.'

'But he said, sir, that you had often met in the smoking room of the Erectheum,' said Jocelyn.

Mr Pontifex smiled cynically.

'That,' he said, 'I take to have been a piece of vain-gloriousness on the man's part. I cannot conceive that such a person would obtain entrance to the Erectheum under any circumstances whatever—unless he came to steal the plate.'

Jocelyn made no answer; he knew that in certain ways the Prime Minister was as hopelessly obtuse as a maiden lady who has lived in a cathedral close all her life. He was pondering over the whole mystery when Lesbia uttered a sharp exclamation.

'Here's Jermey, brimful of some news or other!' she said.

Jermey came hurrying along the path from the park. One hand grasped his stout staff; the other clasped tightly some invisible object.

'Mr Pontifex, sir,' he panted out as he came within speaking distance, 'George Albert, sir, he's a-been pottering round the yard, like, and he's a-found this here. Look at it, Mr Pontifex!'

6

The object which the farm-bailiff held out to the Prime Minister, and at which Lesbia and Jocelyn bent forward to look, was a ring. At first sight it looked no more than a plain gold signet ring; a closer inspection showed that the square shield on its upper surface had inset into it some curious stone on which a device, strange and unfamiliar to Mr Pontifex, his daughter and his secretary, was deeply engraven. None of them had ever seen anything like it before.

'Ah!' said Mr Pontifex, taking the ring and turning it over. 'So George Albert found this, eh, Jermey? And where did George Albert find it?'

Jermey wiped his perspiring forehead with the cuff of his sleeve.

'George Albert,' he said, 'was a-pottering about the straw yards a-side of the sheds where them poor critters is a-sleeping their last. He sees this here ring near the door, a-shining at him out of the straw at his feet, and he picks it up and brings it to me, and "Father," he says, "I shouldn't wonder if this here wasn't dropped by the tarnation willun as got at our cattle," he says, just so. He's powerful quick to put two and two together, is George Albert, Mr Pontifex, sir.'

'I am sure he is,' said Mr Pontifex. 'Well, Jermey, you look rather warm with your walk—go into the house and refresh yourself a little. Mr Marchant ought to be here soon. When he comes we'll go back to the farm again.'

'Do you know anything of that ring, father?' asked Lesbia, as Jermey moved housewards. 'I thought you seemed to recognise it.'

'Yes,' answered Mr Pontifex, still examining the ring. 'Yes, I recognised it at once. The man I have told you of was wearing it. I noticed it particularly while he talked to me—you perceive that it has a very curious design on the shield.'

‘That narrows things down,’ said Jocelyn. ‘You can be certain now, sir, that the man who assailed you was in the neighbourhood of your cattle sheds last night. The thing now is to trace him.’

‘And, unless I am mistaken,’ said Mr Pontifex, glancing down the carriage drive, ‘here comes the man who can do it. As I have already remarked, I have great faith in Marillier. Step across, will you, Chenery, please, and bring him here.’

The detective whom Jocelyn presently conducted across the garden was one of the best known of the superior officers of New Scotland Yard, and the reason why Mr Pontifex had such faith in him was that some years previously he had been successful in tracing some family heirlooms which had been stolen from Mr Pontifex’s house in Grosvenor Square. There had really been no great or seemingly insuperable difficulty in this feat, but Mr Pontifex was in certain respects a very simple man, and Marillier had immediately become a person of importance in his eyes.

Marillier, told the tale and shown the ring, assumed an air of grave and inscrutable wisdom, and betokened the depth of his feelings in the matter by shaking his head at least half a dozen times, after which he permitted himself to observe that there was a good deal more in the case than met the eye.

‘A very wise observation, Marillier,’ said Mr Pontifex. ‘A very sensible observation. And as regards meeting the eye, it seems to me that it would be well if these details—in short, if any account of all of the affair did not meet the eye of the general public. What do you say, Chenery?’

‘It would certainly be advisable to keep it dark, sir,’ replied Jocelyn. ‘That is—if you can.’

‘Yes,’ observed Marillier, ‘that’s it, Mr Pontifex. It’s difficult work to keep things out of the papers nowadays, sir.’

‘So far,’ said Mr Pontifex, ‘only ourselves, our servants and Mr Chenery here are aware of the occurrence. The veterinary surgeon, of course, must be told the circumstances. I think we can insure secrecy. In the meantime, Marillier, you must pursue your own course—I have full faith in your powers.’

Marillier, safely bestowing the ring in his waistcoat pocket, replied that he would go to work at once, and then remarked that he would like some breakfast, as he had come straight from the Yard within five minutes of the receipt of Mr Pontifex’s message. Mr Pontifex thereupon walked up to the house with him, observing that he would at once instruct Jermey to bind all

the men to secrecy, and Jocelyn and Lesbia were left alone. The youthful secretary stretched his available arm and yawned.

'That comes of a sleepless night and a fifty-mile drive in the morning air,' he said.

'Why a sleepless night?' inquired Lesbia.

'Dog and caustic,' answered Jocelyn. 'I say, Lesbia, this is what the vulgar call a queer go. If that chap, or those chaps, or whoever it is, has or have killed the cattle in this mysterious fashion, what on earth will they do next?'

Lesbia shook her head.

'The man promised your father foretastes—not a foretaste,' said Jocelyn. 'What's the next going to be? Perhaps—perhaps they might take it into their heads to have a go at you, Lesbia!'

'Really, Jocelyn, you do say some horrid things at times!' she exclaimed. 'How can you think of such a thing?'

Jocelyn rubbed the tip of his aquiline nose reflectively with the little finger of his left hand.

'Well, I don't know,' he said. 'After all, it's not a very far cry from those cattle to you, you know. I should say that next to you the cattle were dearer to your father's heart than any living thing in this world. If I were you, Lesbia, I should be awfully careful. If it's poison, they might introduce it into your morning cup of tea, or—'

'Jocelyn, this is really a serious affair,' she said, eyeing him with displeasure.

'Just so—it is much more serious than you think, Lesbia,' he replied. 'They will go for something human next time. Perhaps they will polish off the Cabinet at one fell swoop, excepting the Prime Minister. Or, as I say, they may go for you. It entirely depends upon what sort of feelings they have. It will be something that will hit your father hard, anyway. Because, Lesbia, if these fellows can really deal out death in this marvellous fashion they're going to have those ten millions. Oh, yes, they're going to have them.'

'We don't know yet that the poor cattle did not die from natural causes,' said Lesbia.

'No, my dear, that is quite true,' said Jocelyn. 'But I think we may form our own conclusions. I never yet heard of twenty-two able-bodied and healthy cattle lying down and expiring in company, and I don't think anybody else ever did. No, Lesbia, these chaps are diabolically clever—those

sort of men are going to be masters of the world in the future. The man who stopped your father, the emissary, knew what he was talking about when he said that power lay in the hands of the chemists. I'm not a very profound sort of person, as you know, but I've often thought that myself. Navies and armies, Lesbia, are not going to be anywhere in the days to come. Instead of shooting people we shall poison them, or asphyxiate them, or shrivel them, or—'

'If the cattle were poisoned we shall soon know,' said Lesbia, interrupting him, 'for there's Mr Marchant, the veterinary surgeon, and I suppose he'll be able to tell.'

Jocelyn left Lesbia in the garden and went across the park with Mr Pontifex, Marillier and the veterinary surgeon. Marchant was a young man who had already made a name in his profession; he had been Gold Medallist of his year and was still a keen student, but his amazement was palpable as he listened to Mr Pontifex's lucid and ordered account of what had happened. It was still more palpable when they entered the sheds and saw the dead animals.

'These beasts have been dead about twelve hours,' he said, after a cursory examination. 'And whatever killed them they were killed instantaneously. They just lay down and died straight off. You can see for yourselves there isn't a sign of a struggle, no, nor of any pain. This is beyond me, Mr Pontifex—you should call in an expert in poison. For I'll swear it's poison of some sort.'

'Why not send for Acheson, sir?' suggested Jocelyn, naming a great expert at the Home Office. 'I know his private address.'

And the Prime Minister telephoned to Acheson, and that famous man hurried down during the day, and he and Marchant were closeted together with one of the dead animals for some time, and they emerged as mystified as when they went in.

'There is not a trace of any known poison,' said Acheson, discussing the matter later with the Prime Minister. 'You are face to face with something at which I simply dare not guess.'

'But are there no symptoms, no signs, no—anything?' exclaimed Mr Pontifex. 'Surely—surely there must be something on which you, with your vast experience, can form some theory?'

The specialist lifted his hands and let them drop.

‘There’s nothing!’ he said helplessly. ‘Nothing! That cowman, or bailiff, or whatever you call him, of yours, hits the nail on the head in his bluff way. It’s a visitation. And—it makes me afraid.’

Mr Pontifex went back to town next day with Lesbia in a state of great nervous trepidation. What was he to do? Was he to tell his colleagues of the Cabinet of the mysterious happenings at Somerbourne, or was he to keep the knowledge to himself? And when would the next blow fall?

Despite his anxieties and his forebodings Mr Pontifex found time during the afternoon of that Monday to drive to the shop of a second-hand bookseller, who had recently forwarded him a catalogue, in which there were one or two rare volumes specified, which the Prime Minister, an ardent book-collector, desired to possess. There were several people in the shop when Mr Pontifex reached it; one or two people came in after he had entered. The proprietor found the books for him; Mr Pontifex laid them aside while he stepped into the proprietor’s office to write a cheque. He emerged, picked up his newly-acquired treasures and reentered his motor-brougham. Bibliophile-like, he immediately opened one of the old volumes. A folded sheet of plain notepaper fell out. Mr Pontifex unfolded and looked at it. The ink was fresh.

> ‘You have had the first manifestation of our power in the case of your prize cattle,’ ran the note. ‘The next will be in the case of human beings.’

This communication was signed with the device which Mr Pontifex had already seen on the shield of the gold ring picked up by George Albert Jermey in the straw-yard at Somerbourne.

PART 2

DEATH?—OR MURDER?

1

As the injury to Mr Jocelyn Chenery's right hand prevented that young gentleman from discharging his secretarial duties for the time being, he was left to his own resources, and it occurred to him that he might do much worse than pay a duty visit to a maternal aunt who resided in the Isle of Wight, and from whom he had considerable expectations. He therefore journeyed down to the island on the same afternoon which witnessed the Prime Minister's visit to the second-hand bookshop, and there he remained for the next two days, when, feeling that he had performed all that was required of him, and wishing to see the doctor as to his now rapidly-healing wounds, he returned to town. And on the return journey, as fate would have it, he fell across an adventure which brought him once more in touch with the strange doings of the previous Sunday at Somerbourne Manor.

Jocelyn Chenery's maternal aunt resided near West Cowes, and Jocelyn journeyed homewards by way of the Solent and Southampton. On the little steamer which carried him up to the mainland there were quite a number of people, for the tourist season had already set in, and folk of all manner of nationality were about. Jocelyn strolled about the deck watching them carelessly, speculating about them idly. There were French people, and German people, and American people in large numbers, and when he had reviewed them all, he decided that none of them interested him in any unusual degree. But suddenly he found one fellow passenger who interested him so much that for the next three or four hours of that day he was interested in nothing else.

This fellow passenger was a young gentleman whom Jocelyn had observed when the boat came up to the pier at West Cowes. He had presumably come on from Ryde or from East Cowes, and was standing detached from the other passengers, meditatively regarding the scenes before him. He

was a tall, well-built young man of apparently twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age; his healthily-tanned cheeks, close-cropped fair hair and erect figure, garbed in a neatly-cut suit of blue serge, gave him much of a military appearance; Jocelyn set him down as an army man. He gave him a closer inspection when he himself stepped on board, and noticed that the stranger possessed that curious shade of blue in his eyes which is so often seen in the eyes of men who elect to follow one or other of the services; much of his tan, he was sure, was the result of exposure to tropical suns. After that, but for a mere accident, Jocelyn would have noticed the young man no more.

The accident was this:—The weather in the Solent that morning was something more than gusty and the sea was decidedly choppy in consequence. The stranger was standing at the side of the boat, gripping the rail with his left hand, which was encased in an obviously new and therefore immaculate yellow glove, when a sudden upheaval sent a heavy splash over the side, which was discharged for the greater part upon his arm and hand. He drew back as the boat righted itself, shook his arm, and with a grimace began to draw off the saturated glove. And Jocelyn Chenery, who stood near and was watching him, suddenly found himself staring at what he felt certain to be a replica of the mysterious ring which George Albert Jermey had picked up in the straw-yard at Somerbourne Manor on the previous Sunday morning.

To say that Jocelyn was surprised is to put the case in mild language. He felt as if he had suddenly hit up against something very formidable. He had caught a full view of the shield of the ring, and there was no mistaking the peculiar symbol. There was no doubt about it—the ring on the third finger of this stranger's left hand was an exact counterpart of the ring found at Somerbourne and now in Inspector Marillier's keeping.

Jocelyn Chenery took a turn about the deck and asked himself what this meant. The design on the ring was so curious in character that he could scarcely believe that there could be another ring in the world exactly like it, except by purpose and design. He was quite sure that if this ring, now so near him, and the ring picked up by young Jermey had been shaken up together in a hat he could not have distinguished between them. He wanted badly to know what this meant, what the strange identity portended.

In the brief period of his diplomatic experience Jocelyn had heard a little of secret societies. He knew that signs and symbols were in use amongst them; that members often carried a ring, a tie-pin, even sleeve-links, by

which one could recognise another. Was this curiously-marked ring some symbol—was it the sign of the men whose emissary had waylaid Mr Pontifex? It might well be that it was so; if so, he, Jocelyn Chenery, was going to keep an eye on this military-looking young gentleman in blue serge suit—he was going to know who he was, or at any rate where he lived. He contrived to secure more surreptitious peeps at the ring, and having satisfied himself beyond doubt that it was the exact counterpart of the one found at Somerbourne, he formulated a swift plan of action.

Jocelyn had his manservant with him—one Jannaway, a true-born and thorough-paced Cockney of diminutive size, who was as sly as a fox, as slippery as an eel and as faithful as a dog. Him, Jocelyn sought out and found sitting between two portmanteaux, gazing inquiringly at Netley Hospital, which they were just then passing, as if he wondered how many patients it contained.

'Don't get up, Jannaway,' said Jocelyn, before the valet could rise, 'and don't look as if we were talking to each other about anything particular. Look unconcerned, will you?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Jannaway, who immediately knew that something was afoot.

'Look round you casually—take your time,' said Jocelyn. 'You see that gentleman along there—in a blue serge suit and straw hat?'

'Officer-looking sort o' gentleman, sir—yes, sir,' replied Jannaway, giving the stranger a lightning-like but entirely comprehensive look. 'I see him, sir.'

'I want to know where he lives, no matter where it is,' said Jocelyn. 'When we get to Southampton don't bother about me or the things any longer—don't even know me. I'll see to the things—you keep your eye on that man. Here—put this money in your pocket, Jannaway,' he continued, handing the valet a couple of notes. 'Follow him wherever he goes until you run him to earth and get his address. You understand?'

'I understand, sir,' replied Jannaway. 'I'll do it, sir. Distance no object, I suppose, sir?'

'None!' answered Jocelyn. 'If you want more money, wire me. Now, don't know me again. Go off with the rest at Southampton and leave these things to me—you devote yourself to this man. Do it cleverly, Jannaway—there's a good deal depends on it.'

‘Leave it to me, sir,’ replied Jannaway. ‘I’ll start on the job right now, sir.’

Jocelyn strolled off to another part of the boat, and Jannaway, in order to show how thoroughly he could play the part of private detective, immediately forsook the suit-cases and other impedimenta which he had been guarding, and lighting a cigar began to pace the deck like any other emancipated being. He took occasion to make a more careful inspection of the young gentleman whom his master had pointed out to him, and he noticed one or two things about him which Jocelyn Chenery would not have observed. For Jannaway sprang from a class which has to keep its eyes perpetually open and he could see through the back of his head.

The valet went off the boat at Southampton with his hands in his pockets, and Jocelyn had to find a porter to carry the things to the train for Waterloo. The stranger was on the platform before him; there was no great coincidence in the fact that he and the stranger, by the agency of their respective porters, were placed in the same first-class smoking compartment. And all the way to town Jocelyn had abundant opportunities of seeing the mysterious ring, and he said to himself a hundred times that though that was certainly not the mysterious ring which young Jermey had found, it was its double, and as like it as a split pea is to its other half.

He left the compartment at Waterloo, apparently indifferent to his travelling companion, whom he knew would be attended by Jannaway with infinite solicitude. He passed Jannaway on the platform; Jannaway viewed him all over with a stony and unknowing stare and without as much as the flutter of an eyelid. Jocelyn laughed when Jannaway had gone by; he knew that the valet would follow his quarry, even if the quest took him to the wilds of Central Africa. And with that comfortable assurance in his mind he drove to his rooms on Down Street, and having changed his clothes went off to New Scotland Yard and asked for Inspector Marillier.

‘I suppose you have the ring which was picked up at Somerbourne?’ he said, when he was closeted with the Inspector. ‘If so, I should like to have another look at it.’

‘Certainly, Mr Chenery,’ replied Marillier. He unlocked the drawer and took out a small case. ‘There it is, sir,’ he said. ‘I suppose you haven’t found out anything about it, Mr Chenery?’ he added.

‘No,’ replied Jocelyn, ‘no. At least—not yet.’

He turned the ring over and over thoughtfully. No—there was no doubt whatever that the one he had seen on his fellow-traveller's finger was the duplicate of this. He handed the ring back to Marillier, who had been watching him with curiosity.

'Have you ever had much to do with secret societies, Inspector?' asked Jocelyn.

'A little, Mr Chenery,' replied Marillier. 'Just a little.'

'Do you know whether their members ever wear rings, or pins, or any similar adornments by which they can recognise each other?' Jocelyn inquired, regarding the Inspector narrowly.

'I have heard of such things, Mr Chenery,' said Marillier. 'Why, sir?'

'Because I travelled from West Cowes to Waterloo this morning with a man who was wearing an exact duplicate of that ring,' answered Jocelyn.

Marillier's face purpled with emotion.

'Oh, Mr Chenery!' he exclaimed. 'If only he could have been followed.'

'He is being followed,' replied Jocelyn, quietly. 'My man's following him, and I'll back my man to run him to earth wherever he gets to. You shall hear from me later, Inspector.'

Then he strolled off and amused himself in various ways until it was time to go home and dress for dinner. Arrived at his rooms he found Jannaway engaged in laying out his evening clothes.

'Well, Jannaway?' he asked. 'Where is it?'

'St John's Wood, sir,' answered Jannaway, heroically. 'House called Villa Firenza.'

Jocelyn suddenly gasped and pulled out a card at which he glanced with a feeling of intuition as to what was coming. Yes—just as he had thought!

The same address as that of the Signorina Pepita Vespucci.

2

Jocelyn put the card which the pretty Italian had given him back in his pocket and tried to look unconcerned, though he was quite conscious that his man's sharp eyes would have noticed the action.

'Ah!' he said. 'Villa Firenza, eh, Jannaway? And whereabouts is the Villa Firenza?'

'In one of those quiet streets at the back of Lord's, sir,' replied the valet. 'Stands between Lord's and Circus Road.'

'Did the man drive straight there?' asked Jocelyn.

'Yes, sir,' replied Jannaway, 'straight there, sir.'

'And, of course, went in?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Jannaway.

'Ah!' said Jocelyn. 'You didn't manage to get his name, Jannaway?'

Jannaway gave a final touch to the things which he was laying out for his master.

'Yes, I did, sir,' he replied. 'I managed that at Waterloo. I saw the labels on the portmanteau and the suit-case. Name of Rederdale, sir—V. C. Rederdale, Esq. There were labels—recent ones, sir—of the Grand Hotel, Paris, and of the Pier Hotel, Ryde.'

'That was very observant of you, Jannaway,' said Jocelyn. 'Now—what sort of house does the Villa Firenza appear to be?'

'I couldn't see much of the house, sir,' replied Jannaway. 'It's one of those houses with an uncommon high wall all round; there's a lot of 'em like that in that neighbourhood, sir. From what I could see of it the house looked to be a biggish one, and there's a building in the grounds—a studio or something of that sort.'

'Oh!' said Jocelyn, meditatively. 'Ah! Well, you did very well, Jannaway—I particularly wanted to know where that man went.'

He said nothing to Jannaway about keeping his pursuit of the man with the ring secret, because he knew that no such precaution was necessary—the Cockney valet had always proved himself a model of fidelity, in addition to which he had a personal affection for his master, which was closely akin to that often shown by a much-attached dog. In all that concerned himself he knew Jannaway to be as secret as the grave.

Jocelyn found several letters waiting for him in the room which he used as study and library. He turned them over listlessly, recognising the handwriting of each, but at the bottom of the little heap he came across one, the writing on which was quite unfamiliar to him. He opened it first and was surprised to see that the address was that which Jannaway had just mentioned to him—the Villa Firenza, St John's Wood.

The letter was from the pretty Italian's uncle, whom, from his method of signing himself, Jocelyn found to be a nobleman of some degree in his own country. It expressed in very courteous language the writer's thanks to Jocelyn for the service done to Signorina Vespucci in rescuing her favourite dog, to which, the writer said, the signorina was greatly attached. It expressed the writer's intense regret that, owing to an infirmity which prevented him from leaving his house, he, the writer, had not been able to call on Mr Chenery and thank him personally. And it wound up by inviting Mr Chenery to dine on a certain date in quiet fashion, and with an expression of hope that his wounds were now quite healed.

Jocelyn put this letter in his pocketbook and sat for some time considering the events of the day. He had seen sufficient of life to know that fact is indeed much stranger than fiction, and that what is commonly called the long arm of coincidence is in reality a very attenuated one, yet he was much exercised in his mind by the fact that his fellow-traveller of the morning should have gone direct from Waterloo to what was evidently Signor Vespucci's house. And suddenly remembering his interview with Marillier, he went to the telephone and rang the Inspector up.

'Inspector Marillier,' he said, when the communication was effected, 'you remember our conversation this afternoon?'

'Certainly, Mr Chenery.'

'Will you be kind enough, in case you see or communicate with Mr Pontifex, not to mention it to him?'

'Certainly I will not, sir, if you wish me not to.'

'Thank you, Inspector. You have not spoken of the matter to anyone?'

'Not to a living soul, sir.'

'Thank you again—please don't until you have seen me,' said Jocelyn, preparing to ring off. 'Goodbye.'

'A moment, sir,' said Marillier. 'Did your man find anything out, may I ask—did he get to know—'

But Jocelyn was already ringing off, and he hung up the receiver and went back to his study smiling. He did not want anybody to know of the discovery which Jannaway had made until he himself had come to some clearer conception of its meaning and importance.

He was dining at the Pontifexes that night and he got there early, intending to have Lesbia to himself for ten minutes. But on his arrival he found her in close conversation with her father, who, seeing him enter, beckoned him to join them. Jocelyn saw at once that the Prime Minister looked worn and harassed and as if some heavy responsibility other than the ordinary cares of Government were weighing heavily upon him. He motioned his secretary to a seat.

'As I told you everything at Somerbourne, Chenery,' he said, after Jocelyn had greeted father and daughter and answered a question or two about his visit, 'I think I ought to tell you what has happened since, and Lesbia agrees with me.'

'I suppose you refer to the mystery, sir, and I hope you have had nothing really serious to trouble you,' said Jocelyn.

'I have had something very serious to trouble me, and of course I refer to the mystery,' said Mr Pontifex, a little testily. 'I have never had the mystery, as you call it, out of my thoughts since Sunday morning—it would be a strange thing if I had, seeing what it may mean! Why, I feel as if I were responsible—nay, I suppose I am responsible, Chenery, for the lives of I don't know how many of my fellow men and women. The thing is affecting my sleep; my appetite, my health. However, this is wasting time. Briefly, what has occurred is this,' and he went on to tell Jocelyn of the visit to the second-hand bookshop and the warning found in one of the volumes which he had bought there. 'What do you make of it, Chenery?' he said, half peevishly. 'Think what a horrible thing it would be if these scoundrels, whoever they are, were to murder men and women, perhaps children, as they certainly murdered my poor cattle! It is terrible to contemplate, and I cannot help thinking of the possibility.'

'I think you should take serious advice, sir,' said Jocelyn.

The Prime Minister threw out his hands in a characteristic gesture of his—a gesture that was well known to mean that if such-and-such or that-and-that was the best advice you could give him, you had better have not given any at all.

'Now, to whom can I turn for advice!' he said querulously. 'If I spoke to Riversford he would put his eyeglass in his eye and wonder if I had taken leave of my senses; if I went to Merton he would try to persuade me that there was no need to worry.'

'Neither Lord Riversford nor Mr Merton can get over the fact that your cattle were destroyed in the way in which the man who waylaid you said this strange death should come, sir,' said Jocelyn. 'But I think you could go to better men—outside your colleagues. Why not tell the whole thing to Sir Philip Blackford?' he added, naming an eminent judge who was noted for his strong common sense.

Mr Pontifex's troubled countenance cleared. Although he was Prime Minister he dearly loved to have an occasional reed to lean upon.

'That's a good suggestion, Chenery,' he said. 'Thank you. Yes, I'll certainly speak to Blackford—I'll go and drop him a line now, asking him to come to the House on his way from the Courts tomorrow afternoon.'

Then he hurried away and Jocelyn was left alone with Lesbia. And as he had always been wont from boyhood to make that young lady the recipient of all his secrets, he immediately told her of the events of the day, and asked her what she thought of them. He, too, like the Prime Minister, was not disdainful of a reed.

Lesbia's first words seemed inconsequential.

'Jocelyn,' said she, 'are you really going to accept this Signor—or Cavaliere, or whatever his exact designation may be—Vespucci's invitation to dine?'

'I thought of doing so,' replied Jocelyn.

'But they are absolute strangers!' said Lesbia.

'As to that,' observed Jocelyn, 'I am constantly dining and lunching and breakfasting with absolute strangers, Lesbia. I may dine with absolute strangers tonight.'

'No,' said Lesbia. 'There are only five people coming besides yourself and you know all of them. That is different, too. You may meet strangers at other people's houses, but you know your hosts. You don't know these people a bit.'

‘That,’ rejoined Jocelyn, ‘makes it more interesting. One can get too much of sameness.’

‘These people might be—anarchists,’ observed Lesbia.

‘They might, as you say, be anarchists,’ said Jocelyn, thoughtfully.

Lesbia regarded him attentively.

‘Didn’t you say the girl was very pretty?’ she said.

‘Awfully pretty,’ replied Jocelyn, nodding his head vigorously. ‘Lovely figure—beautiful hair—beautiful eyes—a most melting smile. A bit on the small side—quite petite, in fact—but really, a very charming young woman.’

Lesbia seemed to consider matters.

‘Jocelyn,’ she said, after a ruminative pause, ‘Jocelyn, perhaps it’s a nest of anarchists, and the girl, Signorina Vespucci, is—what do they call it?—a decoy? One does hear of such things.’

‘In novels—’ assented Jocelyn. ‘They read rather well, too. I should like to encounter that sort of thing in real life though; that’s why it might be rather fun to accept the Cavaliere Vespucci’s invitation. I suppose I shall accept it.’

‘I expect you will,’ said Lesbia. ‘Don’t blame me if you get blown up. I am sufficiently insular to be afraid of venturing into houses in St John’s Wood tenanted by gentlemen whose names remind one of a play-bill.’

‘His niece,’ observed Jocelyn, meditatively, ‘his niece said that he was a scientist, a savant. What is a savant, Lesbia?’

‘You will never be one, Jocelyn,’ replied Lesbia. ‘I wish the old days were back when one used to take one’s own servant out with one when one went out to dinner.’

‘Bless me, why?’ demanded Jocelyn.

‘Then you could take Jannaway with you,’ she answered. ‘How do I know you mayn’t run into some danger?’

Jocelyn dropped his bantering tone and was about to make a sober and lover-like reply when Mr Pontifex returned. He looked much better and he rubbed his hands.

‘I’ve written to Blackford,’ he said. ‘Hah!—clever man, Blackford! I’m much obliged to you for the suggestion, Chenery.’

3

Keeping steadily to his original purpose of dining with the Cavaliere Vespucci, if only for the sake of finding out something about the man whose luggage bore the name of Rederdale, Jocelyn Chenery in due course found himself ringing the bell of a door deeply inset in a high wall over the top of which rose an impenetrable curtain of lilac and laburnum. He had purposely dismissed his cab at the end of the road so that he might reconnoitre the Villa Firenza as he approached it, but there was such a wealth of trees in its garden that he could see no more than a cluster of chimneys and a weather-vane. Save that the door in the garden wall was very handsomely appointed as regards its brass-work, and that an elaborate Salve in quaint lettering was inset in its upper panel, there was little in the outer appearance of the place to distinguish it from many of its neighbours, and Jocelyn was certainly not prepared for the sight which met his eyes when a trim parlourmaid admitted him within Signor Vespucci's precincts.

He found himself beneath a pergola of roses that led along one side of a square garden towards the house—an old-fashioned, low-roofed house which might have been bodily translated from the glades and vistas of some well-wooded country park. Before it the garden made a vision of delight. Its centre was filled by a circular lawn of the richest and softest turf; at one corner throwing a protecting arm across a wing of the house, stood a magnificent elm; in the centre of the brilliant sward a curiously-designed fountain threw a diamond-like cascade into a miniature lake. All around the garden were the choicest flowers of early summer; the scent of the roses which clambered all over the pergola filled the air with fragrance. As he followed the maid along the rose-canopied way Jocelyn decided that he knew no place in London one-half so charming at first sight as this house shut in behind its high, plain walls.

The maid led him through a quaint, low-ceilinged hall, full of objects at which he could give no more than a passing glance, into a drawing room which looked out through French windows upon the garden. Jocelyn drew a long breath and gazed about him with wondering eyes. There was nothing that he did not know of London life in its world of luxury and fashion, but he could not recall anything which had ever appealed to him so much as the surroundings in which he now found himself. What an atmosphere of charm, of peace, of an undefinable something that was as elusive as it was perfect! The wide-spreading, quiet room with its prospect of tree and lawn and flower seemed the very place in which to dream away a summer's day. Everything about it was a marvel of quiet delight; the old, old furniture of a curious brocade, the cabinets of china, the cool water-colours and aquatints on the walls, the suggestion of an intense love of beauty and refinement. Everywhere there were flowers, and the scent of roses was as intoxicating as in the Dorothy-Perkins-laden pergola through which he had just been conducted.

'Mr Chenery, I am honoured to receive you.'

Jocelyn, lost in a contemplation of the view from the window, turned sharply at the sound of a man's voice and found himself gazing at a gentleman who sat in a curiously-contrived wheeled chair which had just been noiselessly pushed into the room by the maid who had recently admitted him. And for the moment he forgot room and garden and everything but his host.

For Signor Vespucci at first sight was as surprising as his house had been. Jocelyn had no very clear ideas as to what he had expected the Italian to be like—he had thought of him, perhaps, in the conventional way. What he now saw was a man of apparently forty-five years of age, to whom had been given a beautiful face and a deformed body. Signor Vespucci was a hunchback. His carefully-attired figure, looking smaller than it really was because of his black cloth and spotless linen, was bunched up in his peculiar chair in such a fashion that he looked to be no bigger than a boy of twelve or fourteen. From his waist downward there was nothing to be seen of him; his lower extremities were hidden by a fine silk shawl of elaborate workmanship, which was skilfully draped about them and the chair in such a fashion as to leave nothing of Signor Vespucci visible below the waist; he was accordingly a mere head and body in a setting of black and white.

But Jocelyn Chenery forgot all these things, forgot the man's evident deformity, in looking at his head and face; the head was enormous in comparison with the body, but long rather than wide; a mighty forehead surmounted an oval countenance, clean-shaven and smooth as marble; its tint was that of the rarer sorts of old ivory, and out of it gleamed two eyes black as jet and scintillating with a strange, brilliant fire; the nose was strong and aggressive; the jaw stern and set; the mouth thin-lipped and straight—but as Jocelyn held out his hand the face lit up into the sweetest smile he had ever seen.

'I am sorry that I cannot rise, Mr Chenery,' said the voice, which was as sweet as the smile. 'I have unfortunately lost the use of my legs. Pray sit down—my niece will be here presently. I trust you suffer no ill-effects as the result of your chivalrous rescue of her little dog? I see, at any rate, that you are not bandaged.'

'Oh, I am all right, thanks—it was nothing,' said Jocelyn, hurriedly. 'It was nothing—a mere flesh-wound.'

Signor Vespucci smiled and produced a cigarette-case from the inner pocket of his dinner jacket. He passed it to his guest.

'Smoke,' he said. 'We smoke all over the house. A mere flesh-wound, eh? Not so many years ago, Mr Chenery, your countrymen used to have a great horror of hydrophobia.'

'That's all over and done with,' said Jocelyn, lighting a cigarette.

'Pasteur killed it, I suppose,' said Signor Vespucci. 'I remember that you used to send a great many patients to him in Paris for inoculation.'

'I should think our stringent muzzling order killed it,' answered Jocelyn. 'But of course, I don't know—I don't know anything about science. What a beautiful garden this is, Signor Vespucci! I don't think I've ever admired anything so much in London. There's something so—so—what is it?—about it?'

'Atmosphere,' replied the Italian, with a soft sigh. 'Atmosphere, Mr Chenery. Yes, I am very fond of this place.'

'I should think so!' exclaimed Jocelyn, with enthusiasm. 'Who wouldn't be? One might be out of the world here.'

Signor Vespucci looked down at his shawled legs with a quizzical smile.

'I am always out of the world,' he said, 'so it suits me well. I have never regretted coming to this place. I found it quite accidentally some six or sev-

en years ago. I have, of course, improved it. I built a laboratory at the back of the house—you shall see it after dinner, if you care to do so.'

'I should like it of all things,' said Jocelyn. 'You go in for science, Signor Vespucci?'

'I experiment,' replied Signor Vespucci. 'It is the only thing I can do, you see. I cannot walk or ride, and it is now ten years since I lost the use of my legs. So I dabble in chemistry. It is interesting. And—it passes the time. One cannot forever be reading, or smoking, or sitting in the sunlight admiring the roses. A man loves work.'

Jocelyn was about to give utterance to the extremely trite remark that it was a good thing for every man to have a hobby when the Signorina entered and immediately overwhelmed him with inquiries as to his wound, his probable immunity from further danger, the medical opinion as to the chances of his going hopelessly mad, and with profuse professions of her gratitude for his salvation of her dear Biondello, who would otherwise most certainly have been torn in pieces and eaten. And while she poured forth these floods of inquiry and acknowledgment, Jocelyn smilingly made a closer inspection of her than he had been able to do during their brief rencontre in the Green Park. That the Signorina Pepita Vespucci was a beauty no one could doubt. She made Jocelyn think, in all sorts of vague, indefinite, mysterious ways, of Italy. She made him dream of the blue sky and of the little towns perched, white and red and yellow, on the hillsides, above the olive groves and the vineyards; she brought back to him the elusive scent of the days and nights, the atmosphere that blends the magic of the old with the beauty of the present. There was nothing of the great, stately Roman dama, however, about Signorina Pepita. She was, so Jocelyn had told Lesbia, small of figure, but exquisitely proportioned. She had, however, the Roman hair—great masses of it, blue-black in colour, glossy as a blackbird's plumage; and she had glorious, flashing black eyes, which could look daggers and melt with love, and she was altogether very feminine, and very soft, and very alluring, and Jocelyn thought that she might be nineteen years old.

'And but for this gentleman who risked his life for you and rescued you from those monsters you might have been dead and buried, my 'Dello!' said Pepita, snatching up the small animal whose adventure had led to her meeting with Jocelyn and who had now followed her swirling skirts into the room. 'Therefore, you should make your prettiest bow to him, and do all

your wisest tricks, and lay your hand on your heart and show how grateful you are, Biondello, that you still live.'

'He is much more likely to give Mr Chenery a nip of the finger, my dear,' observed Vespucci. 'He eats too much.'

'Yes,' said Jocelyn, regarding the dog critically. 'He is too fat. Signorina, you should starve him a little.'

'My niece would as soon think of starving herself, I am afraid,' laughed Vespucci. 'And there is the signal that we are not to starve ourselves tonight, at any rate.'

Jocelyn found that there were no other guests than himself. Dinner was served in a quaint Florentine room opening out upon a conservatory filled with rare plants and flowers, amongst which there were concealed miniature fountains which kept up a perpetual ripple of murmuring music. He was delighted with his surroundings and with his dinner, for in addition to the possession of a very healthy appetite Mr Jocelyn Chenery was well known to be something of an epicure and to have a very delicate taste. A dinner in better taste, wines of a better vintage, he had never encountered, he assured himself when, later on, the repast came to an end. Nor had he listened to more interesting conversation—it seemed to him that Signor Vespucci had travelled all over the world and knew all there was to know, and the signorina could also talk well and cleverly. Jocelyn was glad he had come.

They were lingering over the coffee and liqueurs when a maid announced Mr Rederdale, who immediately followed close upon her, and who, from the unceremonious greetings which passed between him and Signor Vespucci, was evidently an intimate friend and well acquainted with the house. And Jocelyn, knowing Mr Rederdale at once for his fellow passenger of the train, glanced instantly and instinctively at the man's left hand.

The mysterious ring was not there.

4

Mr Chenery—Mr Rederdale; Mr Rederdale—Mr Chenery.'

The two young men bowed, shook hands, smiled at each other, and laughed.

Pepita watched them with wondering eyes.

'We have met before,' said Rederdale.

'Yes,' said Jocelyn. 'We met in the train. All Englishmen meet each other in trains.'

'And like all Englishmen we maintained a proud reserve all the way from Southampton to Waterloo,' said Rederdale.

'Never once speaking to each other,' added Jocelyn.

'Did you not even say "It is a nice morning," or "We shall have rain to-morrow"?' asked Pepita.

'No—not even that,' replied Jocelyn.

'Now I am sure that you are true Englishmen,' she said. 'Sit down, Valentino mio, and you shall have some coffee and a cigarette as a reward for preserving your natural characteristics under trying circumstances.'

Valentino mio! Was this good-looking young man, who now no longer wore the mysterious ring with its strange symbol, Signorina Pepita's lover then? Jocelyn wondered and watched. He saw the evident admiration in Rederdale's eyes as he bent across to take a cup from the girl's pretty hand; he thought he saw more. And though he was just then giving a very polite ear to Signor Vespucci, who was entertaining him with an account of a recent invention of Mr Edison's, Jocelyn's thoughts were in reality far away from the subject. He was trying to piece things together.

The ring found by George Albert Jermey in the straw-yard at Somerbourne Manor, was, of course, the foundation-stone of the structure he wanted to build. There seemed little doubt that it had been dropped there

by the person, or one of the persons, who had carried through the outrage on Mr Pontifex's cattle. From its appearance it seemed to be the sign or symbol of some secret society. Rederdale had worn an exactly similar ring in the train from Southampton; he had been traced to this house. Now he was in the house, apparently very much at home. But he was not wearing the ring. Why?

It seemed to Jocelyn, who was to all outward appearance listening attentively to his host, but who in reality was thinking quickly, that he could explain satisfactorily why Rederdale was now wearing the ring. He set out on this explanation by supposing that Rederdale was one of the gang of three referred to by the emissary who had waylaid the Prime Minister on the previous Saturday morning. Now, from what Jannaway had observed of the labels on Rederdale's luggage, Rederdale had recently (the labels being, said Jannaway, quite fresh) been in Paris, and certainly in the Isle of Wight. Returning to London he had heard from the colleague, or colleagues, of the loss of the ring at Somerbourne. That loss (which, of course, meant that there was danger in the ring being picked up) meant the abandonment of the remaining rings. That accounted for the fact that Rederdale was not wearing the ring which had certainly been on his finger in the boat and in the train.

This seemed such a very sensible and commonplace theory to Jocelyn that while apparently listening with all his ears to Vespucci he examined Rederdale with renewed interest as that young gentleman maintained a gentle murmur of subdued conversation with Pepita at the other side of the room. Certainly Rederdale did not look like a conspirator, thought Jocelyn. He was a good type of the clean, honest-natured young Englishman, not so very much more than a boy, who would have a healthy dislike of plots and conspiracies and machinations. There was an air of frankness, of candour about him which was unmistakable; he had a way of looking directly at anyone to whom he spoke, and the grip of his hand was firm and sincere. What, then, had he been doing with that mysterious ring, and why was he not wearing it now?

'—But that, of course, is a theory which has not yet been put into practise,' Signor Vespucci was saying when Jocelyn recalled his thoughts from these perplexing problems and forced himself to listen to his host. 'We shall see, Mr Chenery, we shall see! Meanwhile, it is a question that deserves consideration.'

‘Oh, of course!’ said Jocelyn, wondering what Vespucci had really been talking about. ‘The subject must be of the greatest interest to you. I wonder if I may see your laboratory?’

‘I was just going to propose it,’ said Vespucci. ‘Rederdale, you have seen the workshop so often that you won’t care to revisit it now. We will leave you to tell Pepita all about your doings in Paris. But you might lend me a little of your strength as far as the laboratory door. You see how dependent upon others I am, Mr Chenery.’

Jocelyn jumped to his feet, expressing his willingness to lend a hand with the chair, but Rederdale had already opened a door at the side of the conservatory and now came forward to do what was evidently a usual task. He wheeled the chair forward and out into another garden at the rear of the house.

‘You will observe, Mr Chenery,’ said Vespucci, as Jocelyn walked by his side, ‘that there are no steps on the ground-floor of my house and gardens—all is on the level, so that I can be easily wheeled about. I am perfecting a new chair in which I can propel myself. I have had one or two already, but they did not satisfy me. This one will. Necessity is certainly the mother of invention—my wits began to sharpen wonderfully on the subject of locomotion when I lost the use of my legs. There is my laboratory at the end of the garden.’

Jocelyn looked about him. The garden in which he now found himself closely resembled that in front of the house, but was not quite so gay with flowers nor so canopied with trees. At its further extremity a thick screen of carefully-trained copper beech half-hid a modern building in the Moorish style, towards which Vespucci was pointing.

‘Yes, there it is,’ said Vespucci, thoughtfully. ‘It is a very convenient laboratory—it cost me much thought, labour and money. It is scarcely in keeping with the architecture of the house, though, so we try to hide it as much as possible by this screen of copper beeches trained on espaliers. But they need so much cutting.

Rederdale wheeled the chair to the door of the laboratory, opened it with a key which Vespucci produced from his waistcoat pocket, and having pushed the chair inside, laughingly told the Italian to call when he required his services, and went back to the house and Pepita. There was an alacrity in his step which made Jocelyn certain that he was ardently in love with the girl.

The laboratory was almost in darkness, though it was still scarcely dusk in the flower-scented garden outside. Jocelyn was conscious of various shapes looming in the gloom, and of a strong smell of chemicals. He sniffed involuntarily. Vespucci laughed.

'Ah, you smell certain things that I was trifling with this afternoon,' he said. 'Your nostrils will soon get used to that. Now that good boy Rederdale, being in a hurry, has not pushed my chair quite sufficiently forward—do you mind, Mr Chenery?—thank you; now I can touch the electric light switch.'

A soft flood of silvery light, peculiarly light and clear, suddenly burst out all round them; Jocelyn, after a preliminary blink or two, looked about him and saw that he was standing in one of the most perfectly-appointed laboratories he had ever seen. Little as he knew of these things he saw at once that Signor Vespucci must be a man of rare knowledge and considerable means; only a savant of the highest degree could have known how to fit such a place up; only a rich man could have afforded the fitting. He saw at a glance that everything was on the most elaborate scale, and he uttered an exclamation of wonder.

'Yes, it is a good laboratory,' said Vespucci. 'Now, if it would be no trouble to you to push me along, I will explain things to you, but without trespassing on your patience. Don't be afraid, Mr Chenery—I won't bore you.'

Jocelyn found nothing boring in the wonderful inventions and apparatus which his host indicated and described to him as he moved the wheeled chair about the laboratory. Vespucci was so entertaining indeed that Jocelyn became quite absorbed and confessed laughingly that science was being made a fairyland to him. But he had scarcely paid this spontaneous tribute to his host when he was rudely brought back to the contemplation of the real. Turning the corner of a large table partly fenced in by a screen he caught sight of something lying on the table which made him jump nervously as any girl.

'My God!' he exclaimed. 'What's that? Why, it's—it's a dog! And—it's alive!'

'Only a dog that I'm vivisecting,' remarked Vespucci, unconcernedly. 'I was busy with it this afternoon.'

Jocelyn forced himself to look again at the object which had caught his unsuspecting eye. On the table lay a dog—obviously one of those street

arabs of the canine race who belongs to nobody or who has come down from a better estate; a mongrel, and yet with some signs of breeding about it. It was strapped securely to the table and lay as if dead or sound asleep, but there was the faint, sweet smell of some anaesthetic in the air, and Jocelyn knew that the poor beast had been drugged before the cutting up of its unfortunate body began. And then he suddenly saw what the nature of the experiment was, and he turned away, sick and shuddering.

'Horrible!' he said. 'You go in for—for that?'

'I go in for the acquisition of any form of knowledge, Mr Chenery,' replied Vespucci.

There was a new note of something very like hardness and coldness in his hitherto friendly and pleasant voice, and Jocelyn pushed the wheeled chair away from the table towards more attractive things.

'I don't know much, if anything, of these things,' he said half-apologetically. 'But I'm awfully fond of dogs, and—isn't that a bit cruel?'

Vespucci laughed.

'Not a bit, Mr Chenery. What was that beast's life before I laid hands on him? He had been kicked and chivied, starving, about the streets until he fell into the hands of the police,' he answered. 'He falls into my hands—for a few days I feed him up and give him a good time—then, when I wish to experiment, I anaesthetize him. What more does he know after that of either pain or pleasure? Nothing—absolutely nothing. Then, when I have done with him, a merciful dig of a scalpel through his heart—and it is all over.'

'But wasn't his life his own?' said Jocelyn diffidently.

'One can't think of mere details when one has a great object in hand,' replied Vespucci, dryly.

He concluded his exhibition of the laboratory and Jocelyn presently wheeled him back to the house and into the drawing room. Pepita was singing Italian songs at the piano and Rederdale was hanging over her. And watching them from the hearthrug was a man at sight of whom Jocelyn felt an instinctive fear.

5

Various personalities create various impressions. Many personalities create none at all; some create in forcible degree, giving out impressions of attraction, repulsion, fear, love, as the case may be. Why the man whom Jocelyn Chenery found standing on the hearthrug in Signor Vespucci's drawing room should have so suddenly inspired him with a sense of uneasy apprehension was beyond his understanding then and for some time afterwards. Yet it was so, and he knew that there must be some reason for it.

Yet why? The man was surely nothing to be afraid of, at a first superficial glance. He was a little, under-sized, somewhat effeminate-looking person who might be twenty-five, who might be thirty; his clean-shaven, pale face was framed in a profusion of long black hair which formed an aureole around it; he had all the outward semblance of the poet or the musician, and it was accentuated by the enormous bow of black silk which was artistically arranged beneath his chin. That he was musician or poet seemed to be further indicated by the fact that he wore a velvet jacket, a coloured waistcoat and black trousers ornamented with a strip of silken braid. Jocelyn noticed his fingers, long, slender, shapely, beautifully kept, and white as a girl's. Decidedly, he said to himself, this is a fellow who makes verses and probably contents himself by reciting them in shaded drawing rooms to damsels of a precocious and aesthetic turn of mind.

But—why the sense of fear, the sense of repulsion? Was it in the little velvet-coated gentleman's eyes, that suggestion of something not quite holy or safe? Vespucci's wheeled chair made no sound on the thick carpet, and he and Jocelyn had entered the drawing room before the man on the hearthrug had been aware of their presence. But in the second which elapsed before he turned and saw them Jocelyn had caught the expression in his eyes and in the muscles of his set mouth. He was watching the two

young people at the piano, and Jocelyn read his secret. Whoever he was, he was jealous—furiously, madly jealous, and his eyes were those of the wild animal longing to leap, to seize, to tear and rend with blind, unreasoning anger; it seemed to Jocelyn that he could fancy those white, tapering fingers at Redirdale's throat. Then the stranger became aware of Vespucci's presence and turned towards him, and his face and eyes became as smooth and suave as the surface of a mountain lake on a quiet day.

Vespucci held up a finger and smiled as the velvet-coated man stepped forward. Pepita was singing, and Jocelyn, whom Lesbia, for his own good, was continually dragging to the best concerts in London, knew that Pepita was singing divinely. He was not yet sufficiently acquainted with music to know whether her style and her technique were absolutely correct, or if she had been taught by a great master; all he knew and cared to know was that her voice was like a nightingale's burst of song in a springtide evening. He saw that Redfirdale was entranced; he felt inclined to be entranced himself. He was still in a dream of melody just floated by when he heard Vespucci's voice, soft and smooth, addressing him.

'Mr Chenery—my dear friend, Herr Max von Schleinitz!'

Jocelyn turned sharply, bowed, and took the shapely hand which von Schleinitz held out to him. Vespucci laughed.

'You were absorbed in the music,' he said.

'Yes,' replied Jocelyn, with frankness, 'I was. What a beautiful voice your niece has, Signor Vespucci. I suppose she has had great masters?'

The Italian shook his head.

'She has never had a master at all,' he answered with a shrug of the shoulders. 'Music of any sort comes natural to Pepita—she is a genius. It would be a wonder if she were not. My poor and much-regretted brother, her father, was a great singer; her mother was a diva. Yet some people do not believe in the transmission of genius. I do. Sing again, my Pepita; you have a most appreciative audience. Mr Chenery is enraptured.'

Pepita turned from the piano and flashed an inquiring smile at Jocelyn. He moved towards her.

'You are fond of music?' she said. 'You know music?'

'I am ashamed I know next to nothing,' replied Jocelyn, 'but I am continually being taken to operas and concerts—'

'Ah, your fiancée makes you go?' she interjected. 'I understand. You do not go for the love of music, is it not?'

‘But I could listen to you, signorina, forever!’ protested Jocelyn, with a whimsical glance at Rederdale.

Pepita shook her dark head at him.

‘I think you mean no more than to pay me a pretty compliment,’ she said. ‘But I will sing something very nice to you. Valentine, pass me that portfolio.’

Jocelyn retired into a shaded corner in an embrasure between the piano and the window and, himself secure from observation, watched the people in the room. Vespucci occupied himself with a review while Pepita was singing; von Schleinitz buried his small person in a big armchair, and folding his arms seemed to contemplate the ceiling with the abstraction of a philosopher; Rederdale hung about the piano as young men will, whose adored ladies make melody. It seemed to Jocelyn that if Rederdale and the fair Pepita were not already engaged there seemed to be a very good understanding between them, and from one or two glances with which he observed von Schleinitz to favour them, his first impression of the young German’s passionate jealousy was strengthened.

At ten o’clock Jocelyn took his leave; Rederdale said he, too, must go, and they went away together, leaving von Schleinitz with Signor Vespucci and his niece. Outside the high walls of the Villa Firenza a silver lamp of a full moon was casting a gentle radiance over the leafy gardens of St John’s Wood.

‘What a grand night!’ exclaimed Jocelyn, offering Rederdale a cigar from his case. ‘I shall walk a little—don’t mind if I walk home on a night like this. Which way to you go?’

‘I?’ said Rederdale. ‘Oh, I live in Down Street.’

‘Down Street!’ said Jocelyn. ‘That’s odd! So do I. Funny we’ve never seen each other about. But London’s a queer place. Come on, we’ll go along together, and when we get tired of walking we’ll take a cab. Is von Schleinitz a musician?’

‘Von Schleinitz? No, he’s an inventor,’ replied Rederdale. ‘All Vespucci’s friends are scientists, or inventors, or something of that sort.’

‘You, too?’ asked Jocelyn, who was never slow to seek information from anybody.

‘Well, I have invented one or two things, but I am a consulting engineer by profession,’ replied Rederdale. ‘I occasionally do things for Vespucci as he can’t travel much himself. I was coming back from executing a mission

for him in Paris and then in the Isle of Wight when I met you on the boat. Curious coincidence that we should meet again at Vespucci's.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Jocelyn. 'It's a small world. He's a clever man, Vespucci.'

'Vespucci is a very clever man,' assented Rederdale. 'From what I have seen of him I should say he is one of the cleverest men living. But all that he does is done for his own amusement.'

'Then I wish he wouldn't vivisect dogs,' remarked Jocelyn.

Rederdale uttered a sound which was very like a groan.

'So do I!' he said fervently. 'But,' he added quickly, 'he has assured me that he doesn't put them to any pain.'

'Humph!' said Jocelyn, dryly. 'I should like to hear the dog's version. I suppose you've known the Vespuccis some time?' he went on, still greedy of information.

'About fifteen months,' replied Rederdale. 'Vespucci called in my aid professionally; then I began going there a great deal.'

'By the by,' said the irrepressible Jocelyn, when they had walked as far as Maida Vale, 'you'll think me an awfully inquisitive sort of chap, but I was tremendously interested in a ring which you were wearing in the train the other day. I think I once saw a ring like it before.'

'Oh, that!' answered Rederdale—'the ring with the queer device on the shield? Well, that's curious. I picked that ring up in an old curiosity shop in Paris, near the Louvre, the other day, and slipped it on my finger. When I came back to London I drove straight to Vespucci's to report to him on my mission, and he immediately recognised that ring as having belonged to a dead friend of his who fell on evil days. He was so sure of it that I gave him the ring there and then.'

'Bless me!' exclaimed Jocelyn. 'I say, this district is somewhat too thickly populated for a moonlight stroll; what do you say if we take one of these taxicabs, at any rate as far as Park Lane, and do the rest on foot? And as we're neighbours, come in, then, and have a whisky-and-soda and a pipe with me before turning-in time.'

Jocelyn made it a rule never to talk more than was necessary in taxicabs, hansoms, or public conveyances, and he kept silence until they drew up at Stanhope Gate. He was thinking deeply over the events of the evening, and especially over what Rederdale had just told him about the ring. That that ring had some connection with the ring found at Somerbourne Manor he

felt sure; he felt equally sure that Rederdale's account of how it came into his possession and again passed out of it was a true one; there was something about Rederdale that assured one of his sincerity. But he still wanted to make out some link between George Jermey's find and the fact that Signor Vespucci had once had a friend who possessed a similar ring, and he was puzzling his brains over this when he and Rederdale left the cab and continued their walk to Down Street.

Jannaway was in his own particular sanctum, deeply engaged in the study of his favourite Gaboriau, when he heard the sound of his master's key. He went into the dining room to find Mr Chenery with the strange young gentleman whom he had tracked to St John's Wood, but, like the well-trained servant that he was, he showed no sign of recognition nor moved an eyelash.

'Give us some whisky-and-soda, Jannaway,' said Jocelyn. 'You've got some ice, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir,' replied Jannaway, and began to hasten himself. Jocelyn pulled an easy chair forward to his guest.

'Try that, Rederdale,' he said. 'Will you have a cigar or tobacco?'

'Thanks, but I'll smoke one of my own cigarettes,' replied Rederdale. 'I smoke very little, and it's got to be the very mildest tobacco because of my throat.'

He drew out a cigarette-case from the pocket of the light overcoat which he had just laid aside, and standing on the hearthrug lighted it and drew in a long inhalation. And Jannaway, busied at the sideboard, but watching the stranger in the mirror at its back, saw him suddenly raise his hands and stagger and—'Look out, sir, look out, Mr Chenery, sir!' exclaimed Jannaway.

But Rederdale went to the floor in a curiously crumpled heap and lay there still, and master and servant, bending horror-stricken over him, knew that they were looking at a dead man.

6

From the contemplation of Rederdale's lifeless body Jocelyn Chenery rose up sick and shivering. As for Jannaway, he remained on one knee at the dead man's side, his hand thrust within Rederdale's clothing. But in another moment he too rose and stared at his master with a scared face.

'He's gone, sir!' he said. 'He's clean gone!'

Jocelyn made an effort to moisten his parched lips. He nodded his head mechanically.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes!'

Jannaway gave him a quick glance, and snatching up one of the tumblers which he had just filled, forced it into his master's hand. 'Here, drink that quick, sir!' he said commandingly. 'Down with it, sir! Now, sir, that's better, sir—who is he, sir?'

Jocelyn set the tumbler down empty.

'His name's Rederdale, as you know,' he said. 'He lives further down the street—No. 81. I don't know if he has a man or not. My God, Jannaway, is he really dead?'

'He's as dead as a doornail, I'm sorry to say, sir,' replied the valet in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. 'There's no doubt about that, sir, poor gentleman. You wait here, while I run round for a doctor and a policeman, and I'll call in at 81 too, but I don't think he'd a valet, or I should have known.'

Jocelyn stopped him as he was hurrying away.

'Jannaway!' he said. 'Is it—is it necessary to call in a policeman—yet?'

Jannaway gave his master a queer look.

'We shall have to call one sooner or later, sir,' he said. 'You can't keep things like this dark.'

Jocelyn nodded, and Jannaway hurried off. Jocelyn found himself alone with the dead man. He braced himself to the task and went nearer and

looked down at Rederdale, whose body the valet had composed in reverent and decent fashion on the hearthrug. Rederdale lay as if he had suddenly fallen asleep; the expression of his face was quiet, and there was no sign of pain on the already stiffening features over which the grey pallor of death had so swiftly stolen. Involuntarily Jocelyn glanced at the clock; it was not yet ten minutes since they had entered the room; not forty minutes since they had left the Villa Firenza. And Rederdale was already far off from all human call—where?

Sudden—swift—unseen! Jocelyn recalled the words. He lifted his hands, clenched them with rage and fury and helplessness. For he had no doubt that this man had been murdered, stricken down before his very eyes, while he stood by powerless to save him. It was—it must be murder, foul murder!

Jannaway came hurrying back with a policeman and with the doctor who had cauterised Jocelyn's hand after his adventure with the dogs. The doctor hurried forward and made a rapid examination of the body. He rose quickly, shaking his head.

'He's gone,' he said quietly. 'How did it happen, Mr Chenery? What did happen?'

Jocelyn felt as if he were helpless in face of these questions. There was so little to tell, and yet there was or might be so much behind that little! How could he convey, and ought he to convey, the sense of utter fear of the unknown which was in him?

'I scarcely know how to tell you what happened,' he said haltingly. 'It was all over so soon—Jannaway there saw it. It was over in—in a flash, wasn't it, Jannaway?'

'It was over at once, sir,' replied Jannaway, in a low voice.

'But—tell me something!' said the doctor, while the policeman stared wonderingly from the dead man to Jocelyn, and from Jocelyn to the dead man. 'What happened?'

'I met this gentleman, a stranger to me, at a friend's house in St John's Wood,' answered Jocelyn. 'We left together. Finding that we both lived in Down Street, we walked to Maida Vale together; there we took a cab and drove as far as Stanhope Gate. We walked the rest of the way, and I asked him in here for half an hour. Jannaway was mixing us a drink and he was lighting a cigarette—'

'Beg your pardon, sir, he had lighted it,' said Jannaway. 'That's it, gentlemen, on the rug there. He dropped it as he fell.'

'Yes, had lighted it,' continued Jocelyn, 'when he suddenly crumpled up, as it were—didn't fall violently, you know, but seemed to—well, to collapse in a heap. And I am sure he was dead when we bent over him.'

'As dead as a doornail,' said Jannaway, in a whisper.

The doctor bent over the dead man again.

'Queer!' he murmured. 'Heart failure, of course, but it's strange he went with such suddenness. Didn't he cry out, or groan, or make any sign?'

'No,' replied Jocelyn, bluntly. 'He didn't. He just died.'

'Just died,' murmured Jannaway.

'Well, there'll have to be an inquest and a postmortem examination,' said the doctor. 'I'll telephone the coroner's officer at once, and you, constable, must see about removing the body to the mortuary. I suppose you know this poor fellow's name and address, Mr Chenery?'

'Yes,' replied Jocelyn. 'His name is Valentine Rederdale, and he lives at 81 in this street.'

'I've been there, sir—there was no response,' said Jannaway. 'I'm sure he didn't keep a man, sir.'

'Well, the police will doubtless find his latchkey and examine his rooms,' said the doctor. 'You say you met him at a friend's house, Mr Chenery—had you not better let the friend know of what has occurred? And wouldn't it be best to go in person?'

'Yes,' replied Jocelyn. 'Yes. I'll go there at once. You think that was heart failure?' he asked as he and the doctor left the room together, leaving Jannaway and the policeman to make the necessary arrangements for the removal of Rederdale's body.

'Yes,' replied the doctor. 'Yes, it must have been a remarkably sudden case of heart failure. I confess I never heard of a man dying quite as quickly as you tell me this man did, but it is possible. We may find at the postmortem examination that his heart was very seriously affected. No I'll go and ring up the coroner's officer. Good night, Mr Chenery; this has shaken you a bit, eh?'

Jocelyn shuddered.

'I never saw anything so sudden!' he said in a low voice. 'It was—horrible. The suddenness of it, you know—horrible!'

The doctor nodded his head comprehendingly and turned off down the street; Jocelyn hurried to the nearest rank, and finding a taxicab was driven

off to St John's Wood. Barely an hour had elapsed since he and Rederdale had left the Villa Firenza together when he was back again, ringing the bell.

When the maid came he told her that he wished to see Signor Vespucci on the most urgent business, and begged her to manage to convey his message to her master without alarming the signorina. The maid looked at him with some curiosity; she saw how white and strained his face was. 'Miss Pepita has gone to bed this half-hour, sir,' she said. 'I'll tell my master at once.'

She was back at the hall door within two minutes, and begging Jocelyn to follow her, led him to a room which he had not previously seen, ushered him into Vespucci's presence, and closed the door on him. It was only then that Jocelyn realised that he was drawing his breath with difficulty; the agitation of the last hour was telling on him.

He looked quickly around him. Vespucci, still in his wheeled chair, sat at a card-table; on one side of him sat Max von Schleinitz; on the other, a tall, keen-faced young man who looked like an American. There were cards and counters on the table; the men were smoking; each had a glass at hand. They stared at Jocelyn as he came in; the American-looking man regarded him with keen attention.

'Mr Chenery!' exclaimed Vespucci, as Jocelyn halted on the threshold. 'Ah, I see! something has happened?'

'Yes,' said Jocelyn, and could say no more. He felt blindly for a chair and sank into it. The American leaped to his feet, poured something into a glass, and hurrying over to him made him drink. 'Take your time,' he said. 'Take your time.'

Jocelyn drank a little of the brandy which the other had given and got shakily to his feet. 'Thanks,' he said, 'thanks—I'm—I'm all right now. Signor Vespucci,' he went on, lowering his voice and glancing cautiously at the door, 'I have bad news for you—of Rederdale.'

He was better, stronger by that time, and he watched both Vespucci and von Schleinitz. They were gazing at him with blank faces. And being sure that Pepita was not there he delivered his news with startling directness.

'Rederdale is dead!' he said.

Von Schleinitz made no sign beyond a sudden lifting of the eyebrows; Vespucci, however, uttered a sharp exclamation, and Jocelyn saw that he was genuinely astounded and shocked.

'Dead!' he exclaimed. 'Rederdale dead. Impossible!'

‘He dropped dead in my rooms in the presence of my servant and myself,’ said Jocelyn.

‘Dreadful! You fetched a doctor?’ asked Vespucci.

‘At once,’ replied Jocelyn.

‘And what did he say?’ inquired Vespucci.

‘He spoke of heart failure,’ said Jocelyn.

Vespucci nodded.

‘Ah!’ he said. ‘Yes. I always knew poor Rederdale had a weak heart. Oh, yes, yes! Of course you did not know him, Mr Chenery, but if it had not been for that weak heart Rederdale would have gone into the Army. So he is gone! Poor, poor fellow! it is a great blow to me. My friends, we will not play cards any more tonight. I am profoundly grieved.’

Jocelyn left the house a few minutes later, full of doubts, perplexities, wonder. Had Rederdale, who looked so strong and well, really died from natural causes, or had he been foully done to death by some secret form of murder such as that employed on the Prime Minister’s cattle? Well, he must wait and hear what the result of the postmortem examination was—certainly Vespucci had seemed assured of the real cause of Rederdale’s death.

On the following afternoon both Jocelyn and Jannaway had to tell their story of that death to a coroner and his jury. What had seemed such an awful mystery to them, however, seemed no mystery to the two medical men (one of them a famous expert) who had performed the postmortem. They certified that Rederdale’s heart was seriously affected, and they had no doubt that he had died from heart failure. And after some evidence from his brother, who repeated exactly what Vespucci had said to Jocelyn, the jury at the coroner’s bidding returned a verdict in accordance with that and the medical evidence.

Three days later Jocelyn attended the funeral. It was on his return that he found awaiting him a letter which contained but one typewritten line:

> ‘Valentine Rederdale did not die a natural death. He was murdered.’

Part 3
The Interregnum

1

Following the custom which had existed between them since childhood, Jocelyn Chenery told Lesbia Pontifex the full details of everything that had occurred in connection with his visit to the Villa Firenza, from his first crossing of the threshold to his receipt of the typewritten letter. And Lesbia heard, and noted, and was sorely perplexed.

'This has pulled you down, Jocelyn,' she said, looking narrowly at the new lines and nervous expression in his face. 'You look as if you hadn't been sleeping.'

Jocelyn laughed mirthlessly.

'Pulled down?' he exclaimed. 'I tell you, Lesbia, if you'd seen that poor chap Rederdale crumple up and die as Jannaway and I did, you'd wonder if you were ever going to pull up again. I haven't got it out of my mental vision yet. And you're quite correct in your surmise—I haven't been sleeping. Lesbia, there's worse to come!'

'You think, really, Jocelyn, that this unfortunate young man was killed by the same agency that killed father's cattle?' she asked.

'I do. Right or wrong, I do,' replied Jocelyn. 'What else am I to think? I saw the man die.'

'Then what of the people at the Villa Firenza? You say,' Lesbia went on, emphasising her points, 'that except for the vivisection affair—which, you must admit, is a debatable question—you found Signor Vespucci an agreeable, attractive person; you were convinced that he was genuinely astonished, even amazed, when you announced Rederdale's death to him. Does that seem as if he had any knowledge of that death?'

'No,' answered Jocelyn. 'But—there was the other fellow, the German, von Schleinitz. It was plain to me that he was furiously jealous of Rederdale. And if these three, as I suspect, are the three mentioned by the

man who waylaid your father at Somerbourne, why, then, each will know that secret of swift, unseen death.'

'Then you really think the three men you saw that night are the three?' asked Lesbia.

'Yes, I do, whether I'm right or wrong,' replied Jocelyn, doggedly. 'There's the mystery of the ring, and there's the fact of Rederdale's death, and there's the anonymous letter which says he was murdered. Yes, if there is such a gang—and there must be—it's there.'

'Then something should be done,' said Lesbia.

'What can be done?' exclaimed Jocelyn, pacing the room and throwing out his hands with a despairing gesture. 'If I were to move in the matter on what I know or think I know I should only make myself a laughing-stock and a fool! Supposing I set forward my theory of the ring, Vespucci has nothing to do but say, "Ah, yes; it is true that poor Rederdale showed me this curious ring which he had picked up in Paris, and that I recognised it as one, or the facsimile of one, which a friend of mine used to wear long ago, and that I therefore took a fancy to it and begged it from Rederdale—but what, my friends, has that to do with the sudden death of the respected Prime Minister's cattle? If this ring and its fellows are the symbol of the members of some secret society—there are no doubt scores in existence—of that I know nothing." That's what he'd say, Lesbia.'

'Of course,' said Lesbia, musingly, 'you couldn't connect him with the affair on that theory.'

'And as regards Rederdale,' continued Jocelyn, 'supposing I went to the authorities and told them my suspicions, what do you suppose they'd say? If you don't know, my dear, I do! "My dear Mr Chenery," they'd say, "you are no doubt a highly ingenious young gentleman, but it is possible—especially for youth—to be too ingenious. Your diverting attempt to connect the death of Mr Rederdale with the existence of a hypothetical conspiracy would no doubt form a gratifying feature of a penny dreadful or a shilling shocker, but it is not in accordance with strict fact. The fact is that the doctor whom you called in, the police-surgeon, and that eminent specialist, Sir Benjamin Bealy, the highest living authority on these matters, all agreed that the unfortunate man's heart was diseased to the highest degree, and that his death was entirely due to natural causes. Good morning!" That's all I should get for my pains, Lesbia, my dear,' concluded Jocelyn, bitterly. 'It's

like being at sea in a fog. And by the by, did your father ever tell you what the result of his consultation with Sir Philip Blackford was?'

'Yes,' replied Lesbia. 'Sir Philip, when he heard the whole thing, said that if what the emissary said were really true, and if the death of the cattle was really brought about by these people, then there was no denying the fact that we were at the mercy of dictators who could make their own terms.'

Jocelyn nodded his head several times.

'He's right,' he said. 'Of course he's right—he's the largest and wisest head of any man in England, old Blackford. Of course we're at their mercy if they've got this power! But—what can the power be? If poor Rederdale died from its exercise, as I firmly believe he did, there's nothing that we know of that can stop them—they're masters of life and death! What I want to know is—what is this power, this force, that just wilts a man or an animal clean up as if it had been struck dead by the hand of God and yet leaves no trace?'

'I was talking to Professor Maidstone about that—I mean in general terms—at Lady Bridlington's yesterday afternoon,' said Lesbia. 'You know that he's the greatest living authority on experimental chemistry. Of course, I didn't say anything definite to him, but from what I got out of him I should say that if the force which these people wield is anything, it is a hitherto-unknown form of volatile poison which they have discovered, leaving no trace which analysis can discover.'

Jocelyn, who had listened to her in an attitude of profound attention, suddenly smote his hands together.

'Great heaven!' he exclaimed. 'The cigarette!'

Lesbia stared at him.

'The cigarette!' she said. 'What cigarette?'

'The cigarette that poor Rederdale lighted just before he fell dead!' he answered. 'He drew in a long inhalation of smoke—by Gad, Lesbia, suppose that cigarette was poisoned?'

They stood staring at each other for a moment, then nodded at each other with a mutual understanding.

'Yes,' said Lesbia. 'Yes—that's possible.'

Jocelyn rubbed his forehead.

'I remember now that his cigarette-case was in his overcoat pocket, and that when he came into my room he took the coat off and threw it over the

back of a chair,' he said reflectively. 'He took the case out and put it back before lighting the cigarette. Now, supposing—'

'Yes,' said Lesbia, as he paused and began to pace the room again. 'Supposing that—'

'Supposing that these men have really discovered some such terrible method of destroying life as that you hinted at just now, and that they, or one of them, wished to put Rederdale out of the way, what could be easier than to poison his cigarettes while his coat was hanging in the hall at Vespucci's?'

'Nothing,' agreed Lesbia. 'But you must remember that you were convinced that Signor Vespucci's surprise was really genuine, and that the third man, whom you took to be an American, knew nothing.'

'Of course, of course!' exclaimed Jocelyn. 'That's where I see some daylight. That narrows things down to von Schleinitz, Lesbia! If these three, Vespucci, Schleinitz, the American, are the gang, they will all and each know the secret. What was to prevent von Schleinitz, mad with jealousy, using it for his own private ends? What was to prevent him from taking Rederdale's cigarette-case from his overcoat pocket in the hall at Vespucci's, inoculating it with this mysterious poison or whatever it is, and returning it to its place, secure in the knowledge that Rederdale must die and that no one could associate him, von Schleinitz, with his death? Ah, Lesbia, you may be sure that's how that's been done!—but how is it going to be traced home? The cigarette, of course, the cigarette! Why didn't one think of that before?'

Before Lesbia could reply, Jocelyn had suddenly snatched up his hat, gloves and walking cane and was making a dart for the door.

'I've got an idea!' he said, waving his hand. 'A splendid idea! I'll tell you about it later—you'll be at Lady Sternwold's garden-party this afternoon?'

Before Lesbia could say anything to detain him, Jocelyn had shot out of the room and out of the house. He was also out of Down Street and down the steps into the Park before he quite realised what he was after.

'Yes!' he said to himself, swinging his cane vigorously, much to the surprise of various policemen, who knew him as well as they knew the Prime Minister. 'Yes by Jove, that's it! I'll follow that up hot-foot—that must be it.'

Jocelyn made his way to Victoria Street and arrived in that busy thoroughfare, consulted his pocketbook, and then set out to look for the office

of Rederdale's brother, who had been in partnership with him. He found it at last on one of the upper storeys of a high building, and was fortunate enough to find Mr James Rederdale in.

'I am afraid you will think I have come here on a very curious errand,' he said, when they had exchanged the usual commonplaces. 'The fact is, Mr Rederdale, although I had only just met your brother when his unfortunate death occurred, I formed a liking for him, and I had hoped that our acquaintance would have improved. And I came here to ask you to give me some little memento of him.'

'Certainly, certainly, Mr Chenery!' said James Rederdale. 'Anything of poor Val's that you would like you shall have.'

'I should like to possess the cigarette-case out of which he took his last cigarette,' said Jocelyn.

James Rederdale rose from his desk and opened the door of an inner room. 'I have all his personal belongings here,' he said. 'I had them moved here the other day. Let us see if we can find the case.'

'It was in the inside pocket of the light overcoat which he was wearing when the end came,' said Jocelyn.

'Then it will be there now, for nothing has been touched,' said the brother. 'Perhaps you can point out the coat?'

Five minutes later Jocelyn left the building with the dead man's cigarette-case in his vest pocket. He hailed a taxicab, and bidding the man drive to Down Street, drew the case out and examined its contents. There were five cigarettes left in it—all of the same brand of a very mild tobacco; they bore the name of a famous firm of cigarette-makers near Piccadilly Circus. Jocelyn shut the case up again; he was full of impatience, and he rang for Jannaway as soon as he got into his rooms.

'Jannaway,' he said, 'what became of the cigarette Mr Rederdale had just lighted when he fell?'

'I've got it, sir,' answered the valet; 'kept it as a curio, sir.'

At a sign from his master Jannaway fetched the curio. Jocelyn almost snatched it from him and looked at it eagerly. Then he uttered an exclamation.

It was a perfectly plain cigarette, and there was neither brand nor name upon it.

2

That afternoon Mr Pontifex and his daughter were due at Lady Sternwold's garden-party at Wimbledon, a district which has recently been discovered by the world of fashion as being worthy to reside in and also convenient of access, though it was once as far away from London—which means Mayfair and Belgravia—as the South Pole. To Mr Pontifex's inward annoyance there was no getting out of this social obligation; he had to go whether he wished to go or not; and his daughter pointed out to him that he might just as well go with a good grace. He was, nevertheless, in anything but a placable temper when he stepped into his automobile and took his place at Lesbia's side, and he plainly expressed his detestation of garden-parties in general and of this in particular.

'You would much rather have been pottering round an old bookshop, wouldn't you, father?' remarked Lesbia. 'But men in your position have to make martyrs of themselves every now and then, haven't they? And after all, so long as you show up and look very pleasant and smile at everybody, you will have done your duty.'

Mr Pontifex groaned in spirit. He did not feel like smiling at anyone. Just then he had no very pressing cares of State, which was a very fortunate thing, for he was terribly upset about the warning which had been conveyed to him within the covers of the old book. Night and day he was always wondering what was going to happen; the uncertainty affected his sleep and his appetite. He thought of his tormentors as implacable; he believed that they would have no more mercy on human beings than they had shown to his poor prize cattle. Nothing and nobody gave him any comfort. Marillier, in whom he had cherished such faith, seemed to be about as useful in this instance as a wooden monkey; Sir Philip Blackford, with that blunt straightforwardness which characterised him and was not always welcome to his

friends, had told him plainly that the mysterious three, if their pretensions could be justified, had got him in a noose which they could tighten whenever they pleased.

'If these men, Pontifex, can carry out their threats as made to you by the emissary,' said the eminent judge, smiting the Prime Minister's desk with a fist that would have done credit to a prize-fighter; 'if these men were the secret slayers of your cattle by means so insidious, so subtle, that our best experts cannot detect them, then I say that all there is to say is—God help us! Men who can exercise a power like that can dictate to the world.'

'But what am I to do?' asked the Prime Minister, helplessly.

Sir Philip smiled grimly and rose.

'One of your eminent predecessors,' he answered, 'once used a phrase which became classic. He said "Wait and see." I'm afraid you'll have to wait and see what will happen, Pontifex. It's all in a nutshell—if these men have got that awful power they've got the whip-hand of you, and of me, and of everybody. Ten millions! Pooh—I wonder they didn't ask for a hundred millions! You'll have to wait and see, Pontifex, you'll have to wait and see.'

And Mr Pontifex was waiting, and he was wondering what he would see, and he was very unhappy. How did he know, for instance, that the blow which he dreaded, the second manifestation of that horrible power of sudden death, might not fall, might not be shown, at this very garden-party of Lady Sternwold's? All London would be there—at least, all the London that counts. What more favourable opportunity could these miscreants have? Truly, the whole thing was awful to think of. Mr Pontifex sighed heavily and, with Lesbia's permission, lighted a cigar.

The old adage which tells us that there is always safety in numbers might have presented itself for commendation to Mr Pontifex that afternoon. There were so many people at Lady Sternwold's garden-party that, distinguished man as he was, the Prime Minister saw a faint chance of effacing himself, even of finding a haven of rest. He noted with satisfaction that the garden and grounds of his hostess's residence were exceptionally large and well-wooded, and when he had been, as it were, on exhibition for a time, and had shaken hands with quite a lot of people, some of whom he did not know from Adam, he began to edge his way towards what looked like a lonely part of the place, where, free from the music of the military band and the chatter of the guests, he could have a little peace and quietude. He managed this rather more easily than he had expected; there were various

amusements and attractions on the lawns and river, various sorts of cup, cool and refreshing, in the tents, and most people seemed to prefer gregariousness to solitude. Mr Pontifex, slipping inch by inch out of the maelstrom of summer dresses, at last turned down a quiet walk which led through a deep shrubbery to the very edge of the grounds, abutting on the common in its best and most picturesque parts. There he was fortunate enough to find a small summerhouse, untenanted, and into it he entered, and lighting a cigar sat down with a great sense of relief. The music of the band came to him from afar off; he was much more interested in the hum of the insects flitting about amongst the leaves and flowers. He closed his eyes and put his head back; in spite of the cigar he might have dropped off for a forty-winks' nap if a voice had not suddenly broken in upon his solitude.

'Good day, Mr Pontifex—I am glad to have such a favourable opportunity of having a brief conversation with you,' said the voice.

Mr Pontifex looked up sharply. He had a vague idea that he had heard that voice before. He saw standing before him in the narrow doorway of the summerhouse an immaculately-attired gentleman, who smiled upon him in confidential and ingratiating fashion: although Mr Pontifex would have sworn that the gentleman was an entire stranger to him, there was something in the smile that was also familiar. The Prime Minister recognised a slowly-growing conviction that he was trapped for the second time. He had walked some distance from the house and the busy lawns; he had purposely turned into an obviously unfrequented path; it was not very likely that anyone would come along there. He was at the man's mercy—once more. Nevertheless, Mr Pontifex summoned up his dignity and played the game.

'I have not the pleasure, sir,' he began in his iciest manner. But the stranger wagged his forefinger reprovingly.

'We have met before, Mr Pontifex,' he said. 'I need not remind you of our meeting at Somerbourne Manor on a recent Saturday morning. Yes, it is I—I am in yet one more of my numerous disguises. Clever, isn't it?'

Mr Pontifex looked at his enemy with the solemn air of injured rectitude.

'You are a scoundrel, sir!' he said.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. He lighted a cigarette. 'We will not argue about words and phrases,' he said. 'I am here to have a little chat with you. I should have had it in any case before you left Lady Sternwold's, but you have played into my hands by selecting this charming spot as a

retreat. Here we shall not be interrupted—though it really does not matter if we are.'

Mr Pontifex glanced at this cool villain.

'I give you fair warning, sir,' he said in his gravest tones, 'that if anyone comes within sight or hearing I shall summon help and have you given into custody.'

The stranger laughed, showing those white teeth which Mr Pontifex remembered so well. He shrugged his shoulders again.

'No, you won't, Mr Pontifex,' he said. 'No, you won't.'

'And why not, sir?' demanded the Prime Minister, angrily.

'Because,' replied the other, with a significant glance towards the garden, 'because your daughter is here.'

Mr Pontifex started. A cold perspiration burst out all over him; he felt his hands begin to tremble and his heart to beat at a pace which was anything but comfortable.

'What—what do you mean?' he said huskily.

'Merely that from this moment you may regard your daughter in the light of a hostage for my safety,' answered the stranger, coolly. 'If you do anything by word or sign to interfere with my safety your daughter will never leave these grounds alive. She is nearer to death at this moment—swift, unseen death, Mr Pontifex—than she has ever been in her life or ever will be, unless from us on some other occasion. Of course, she doesn't know it—don't force us to the necessity I have hinted at. But you know what we can do—if we can send twenty prize cattle out of the world at a breath we can easily dispatch one girl. Realise the situation, Mr Pontifex.'

Mr Pontifex did realise the situation and his lips became so dry that his cigar went out and he himself felt a curious sickness of body as well as of soul. He was frightened—and frightened in the worst way.

'What do you want of me?' he managed to get out, his voice sounding to himself in a faint whisper. 'What?'

'Merely to deliver an ultimatum, Mr Pontifex,' replied the stranger. 'We have given you a manifestation of our power in the case of your prize cattle, though we regretted the necessity. We warned you through the medium of the bookshop that we should give you a manifestation in the case of human beings unless you acceded to our demands. Now we give you four days from now. Unless we receive the ransom demanded—ten millions of pounds sterling—on the third day from now you will be treated to a mani-

festation which will make the world shiver from pole to pole. This is no idle boast, Mr Pontifex—we are men of our word.'

The Prime Minister felt his heart turn to lead within his bosom.

'It is impossible!' he said. 'I tell you impossible! How can I find you ten millions of money?'

'You can easily find it, Mr Pontifex,' said the stranger, calmly. 'And you should be thankful that we have not demanded more. We have you under our thumb—we are your masters. Mr Pontifex, you have just got to do what we command—if not, well, the fourth day from now will give you an object lesson that will bring you to your knees and your senses. Now, I shall waste no more words. You see this, Mr Pontifex?' he concluded, drawing a sealed envelope from his pocket and laying it on the rustic table between them. 'This contains full directions as to where you are to deposit the amount of the ransom. That is all I have to say, except to repeat that if it is not so deposited by six o'clock in the evening of the third day from this—this day not counting—we shall declare war on you. Mr Pontifex, I wish you good day.'

The stranger vanished as quickly as he had come, and the unfortunate Prime Minister sat staring at the missive which he had cast down. He sat for several minutes in an attitude of complete despair, and when he at last pulled himself together and got to his feet he staggered like an old man. But bit by bit he regained a mastery over himself, and eventually left the summerhouse, first placing the sealed envelope within his breast pocket. Trying to look unconcerned he made his way back to the lawns, and there, coming across Lesbia, he quietly told her that he must make his adieux and go home. A few minutes later he was being whirled back, alone, to London.

3

On reaching Downing Street Mr Pontifex at once went to the particularly private sanctum, whereto not even the most privileged, not even Lesbia herself, could gain admittance except at his pleasure. He told his butler to send him some tea there; when the tea had been brought and he knew that he was secure from all interruption, he drew the sealed envelope from his breast pocket and opened it carefully.

Up to that time the Prime Minister had had one harbour of refuge in the stormy sea of trouble and perplexity in which he had lately been sailing. He firmly believed that he was dealing with a gang of most accomplished desperadoes; he was sure that they possessed the terrible power of which they boasted; he was certain that the destruction of his beloved prize cattle was a manifestation of that power; he had no doubt whatever that the emissary of the afternoon was voicing the simple truth when he said that unless the demands of himself and his associates were acceded to there would be a sacrifice of human victims. But he could not for the life of him, despite all his astute knowledge of finance, see how these men were going to receive the sum which they named as ransom without disclosing their identity. Ten millions of money, argued Mr Pontifex, is not to be handled as one would handle ten sovereigns or even ten banknotes for a thousand each. If this money were paid over, some person would have to receive it; that person could be arrested, or followed, or traced; anonymity would surely be no longer possible. Accordingly, it was with very inquisitive feelings that the Prime Minister opened the sealed envelope which, he had been given to understand, contained explicit instructions for the paying over of the ten millions. He drew out and unfolded a sheet of paper closely covered with typewriting.

Five minutes later Mr Pontifex, letting the sheet of paper drop from nerveless fingers, covered his face with his hands and groaned. These men, whoever they were, were too clever for him—they must have the subtlety and craft of the devil himself, he said, as he recognised the ingeniousness of the instructions laid down. Those instructions were a marvel of cunning, of foresight, of sheer ability. There would be no risk to them; if the money were paid in the fashion in which they directed, their identity would still be safely concealed; they would still be as vague and nebulous as shadows in a moonlit wood. They were too much for Mr Pontifex; their combined genius was beyond him, and he knew it. And his brain began to throb painfully as he found himself face to face with the terrors which this unseen combination presented to him at such close quarters. He swallowed some of the tea which stood at his side, and rising from his chair fell to pacing up and down the room, his hands behind his back, his head bent, thinking, thinking, thinking—with a hammer-like knocking going on all the time at the back of his much-tired brain.

If the ransom were not paid, upon whom would this blow fall? He had no doubt about the power of the unknown conspirators, whoever they were, to inflict that blow, but whom would they select as their victims? That they were utterly callous about the sacredness of human existence he felt assured, after what the emissary had said in the summerhouse at Lady Sternwold's in reference to taking Lesbia's life if her father gave any alarm. Oh, yes—they would stop at nothing! The probability was that the blow would be a terrible one. What had the man said? Let him recall the words. Yes—that was it: 'A manifestation which will make the world shiver from pole to pole!' Of course, with that awful power in their possession, they could do what they liked. That was what Blackford had said. Why—they might even strike at the Throne! Mr Pontifex shuddered at the thought—yet he recognised its possibility. The greater the manifestation the greater the evidence of power. It was terrible—terrible!

Pausing to pick up the typewritten sheet of paper he again read the communication through—a thought occurred to him and made him read it once more. That done he tore the paper into tiny scraps and threw the scraps into a wastepaper basket: it was nothing but an instinctive feeling of secrecy, he said to himself, that made him do this. But having done it he turned to his desk.

‘I must see Blackford again,’ he murmured. ‘I really must see Blackford. Being Saturday, he may be out of town—I’ll send a note round to his place, and find out. Blackford may suggest something. And something must be done.’

Mr Pontifex sat down and reached across the desk for a sheet of notepaper. And at that moment something in his throbbing head seemed to give way with a sharp crack and his arm fell heavily at his side as he sank into an ocean of blackness. The clock on the chimney-piece behind him went on ticking off the seconds, but the Prime Minister lay huddled up in his chair, unconscious.

Nothing but communications of the most important nature were ever allowed to break in upon Mr Pontifex when he had once entered his private room, and he might have remained there undiscovered and helpless for some time if an equerry had not come across from the Palace on particular business. Then the butler entered the apartment and found his master a crumpled heap, lying half in and half out of his chair. And the house, quiet enough up to then that summer afternoon, suddenly woke into activity and into something like panic-stricken fear.

‘Paralysis,’ said the famous physician who had been hastily summoned. ‘Where is Miss Pontifex?’

‘Miss Pontifex is at Lady Sternwold’s garden-party down at Wimbledon, Sir John,’ replied the butler. ‘Mr Pontifex went there with her, but returned alone not more than three-quarters of an hour ago.’

‘You had better telephone to her at once,’ said the great man. ‘Or telephone to someone there to break the news to her. Tell her to come home.’

‘Mr Chenery will be there—I’ll telephone him,’ said the butler. ‘Is it—is it dangerous, Sir John?’

Jocelyn Chenery had arrived at Lady Sternwold’s somewhat late, having been detained by his father, the old Earl of Hadminstowe, who had come up to town unexpectedly and was full of a grievance against some parvenu or other who had bought land adjoining his own ancestral estate and was doing things thereon which were not, in the Earl’s opinion, fitted to the dignity of the neighbourhood. Consequently the grounds were full of people when he arrived, and he had some difficulty in finding Lesbia and in getting her to himself. But at last he drew her away from the crowd and into a quiet corner.

‘I got hold of it,’ he said as they sank into two conveniently-placed garden chairs.

‘Got hold of what, Jocelyn?’ she asked, staring at him.

Jocelyn took off his silk hat and looked thoughtfully into the crown.

‘Ah, I forgot!’ he said. ‘The fact is, I’ve got the affair so much on my mind that I can’t think of anything else. I mean, I got hold of Rederdale’s cigarette-case. I got his brother to give it to me as a memento.’

‘Well?’ said Lesbia.

‘It came out of his overcoat pocket just as he had left it,’ continued Jocelyn. ‘It had five cigarettes in it—a special brand, made by Chimbonlogos.’

‘Well—what then, Jocelyn?’ she asked.

‘The cigarette which Rederdale lighted just before he died and took out of that case wasn’t made by Chimbonlogos, Lesbia,’ replied Jocelyn, meaningly. ‘It was similar tobacco, to all appearance, but it was in plain, unmarked paper. Jannaway had kept it as a gruesome memento of the poor chap’s death. Lesbia—that cigarette had been placed in Rederdale’s case, and I’ll lay the Bank of England to a penny it had been impregnated with poison! But—it’s innocent enough now. Oh, it was clever, devilishly clever—too clever for mere, ordinary mortals to tackle!’

‘How do you know it is innocent enough now, Jocelyn?’ she asked in sudden alarm. ‘You—you didn’t try it?’

‘No,’ replied Jocelyn, ‘but I remembered what you’d said about Professor Maidstone, and I went round to his laboratory before lunch and got him to test it. He burnt some of the tobacco and blew the smoke into a rabbit’s mouth and nostrils. It only made the rabbit sneeze and cough. But I’m as certain as—my Heaven! Lesbia, look there!’

Startled by Jocelyn’s sudden exclamation and the hand which he involuntarily placed on her wrist, Lesbia looked up in the direction which his eyes indicated. Across the lawn, in a quiet corner of which they were sitting, was slowly advancing a young lady of remarkable if of somewhat vivid charm who, surrounded by a bevvy of evidently admiring cavaliers, was coquettishly bestowing her smiles on one and all with a prodigality truly foreign to English reserve.

‘Ye gods and little fishes!’ said Jocelyn, under his breath. ‘It’s Pepita! And I thought she would be in sackcloth and ashes over poor Rederdale.’

The Signorina Pepita Vespucci looked to be in anything but sackcloth and ashes. She was very gay, very full of chatter and laughter, and was evidently making an atmosphere of her own. And she suddenly caught sight of Jocelyn and came forward with outstretched hand.

'Mr Chenery!' she exclaimed. 'Ah, how delightful! I did not think to meet you here, though, now I come to think of it, I suppose I ought to have been sure that I should.'

'I had no idea that I should meet you, signorina,' said Jocelyn, watching her with some curiosity and fancying that behind all her apparent gaiety of manner he saw some sign of trouble.

'Oh, you would often meet me here,' she said, glancing carelessly about her. 'Millicent Sternwold and I were at school together in Paris—we are more or less of inseparables. You will come to see me again soon, Mr Chenery?'

Jocelyn could not help looking at her more narrowly, neither could he help the words that came involuntarily to his lips.

'I hope under less tragic circumstances, signorina,' he said.

Pepita's fine eyes grew melancholy, her pretty mouth became mournful.

'Ah, yes, poor Valentine!' she said. 'It was terrible. But—it had to be. And we must not think of sad things today. Au revoir, Mr Chenery—and come soon.'

As she moved away again, and Jocelyn turned to rejoin Lesbia, Sir Richard Sternwold tapped him on the arm and drew him aside.

'Chenery,' he said, 'there's just been a telephone message from the butler at Downing Street. The Prime Minister's ill—you've to take Miss Pontifex home at once. Don't alarm her. I've ordered one of my cars for you—it's at the side gate.'

Jocelyn gave Sir Richard one swift look.

'Serious?' he asked.

'Paralysis,' answered Sir Richard.

Jocelyn nodded and went over to Lesbia. He was confident about her; Lesbia was one of those admirable young women who never lose their heads under any circumstances.

4

It is not always wise or polite to tell the truth about great people, upon the state of whose health so many things depend, and the readers of the morning and evening newspapers were only informed that the Prime Minister, who had been much overworked of late, was indisposed and confined to his room. But those who had knowledge of the real truth knew that Mr Pontifex had had a very severe paralytic stroke, and that things were more serious with him than his physicians cared to admit. Now, on the third day after the seizure, although he was conscious he was helpless; worst of all, he was bereft of speech. And to those about him his eyes were full of a dumb entreaty which was terrible to witness.

'There is something that he wants to tell,' said one of the doctors to Jocelyn after a visit to the stricken man's room. 'It is something of which he is conscious himself and which is troubling him greatly. The consciousness of it is not doing him any good. Can you think of what it may be? If it is any political matter, for instance, the mere sight of whichever of his colleagues it is who has charge of it might act as a relief. That colleague's presence would remind him of the matter, and a reassuring nod would give him some peace of mind.'

But Jocelyn could think of nothing. The political atmosphere was just then particularly clear; the horizon unusually unclouded. There were neither wars nor rumours of wars; domestic legislation was rolling along on well-oiled wheels; there was no really vexed question at issue between the dominant parties. No—Jocelyn could think of nothing, and he knew nothing of the interview which had taken place between Mr Pontifex and the emissary of the conspirators at Lady Sternwold's garden-party.

'I am sure there is nothing of a political or diplomatic nature to trouble Mr Pontifex's mind,' he said. 'How long is he likely to remain in this state?'

But the doctor shook his head and would give no definite answer.

'Something is giving him serious trouble,' he said and went away.

Jocelyn repaired to the Prime Minister's room. It had occurred to him that Mr Pontifex was probably thinking of the threatened danger, but then, as far as Jocelyn knew, he had heard nothing of it since the affair of the second-hand bookshop. And since Mr Pontifex could not speak, could not even lift his hand to write, it was impossible to do anything towards elucidating the matter. He tried to say a few soothing words, hoping that they were understood, but the stricken man's eyes were still full of great and unhappy questionings when he left the room.

A servant met him on the stairs with an intimation that Inspector Marillier was asking for him. Jocelyn went down and took the detective into a private room.

'Yes?' he said mechanically. 'You wish to see me, Inspector?'

Marillier took the seat which Jocelyn pointed out and looked at the private secretary with a scrutinising glance. It seemed to him that Mr Chenery looked not only preoccupied but worried.

'I wanted to have a little conversation with you, Mr Chenery,' he said, after a polite inquiry as to the Prime Minister's condition. 'Especially,' he added significantly, 'as it is now impossible to see Mr Pontifex.'

'Yes?' said Jocelyn as mechanically as before. 'What is it?'

Marillier lowered his voice to a tone betokening confidence and secrecy. 'You remember coming to me at the Yard, Mr Chenery, and telling me that you had come across a man who was wearing a ring exactly identical to that found in the straw-yard at Somerbourne?' he said.

'Well?' said Jocelyn.

'You also told me that your man, Jannaway was following that person?' continued Marillier.

Jocelyn nodded, without replying.

'You promised,' said Marillier, with some slight emphasis on the last word, 'to let me know what you found out, but a little later the same afternoon you telephoned from your rooms in Down Street, asking me not to mention this matter of the stranger and the ring to Mr Pontifex or to anyone until you had seen me. And you have never been near me since, Mr Chenery.'

Jocelyn looked at the detective doubtfully. He was not sure as to what Marillier was trying to get at.

‘I don’t know that there has been any need to approach you, Inspector,’ he answered.

Marillier shook his head. There was suspicion of gentle reproach in the gesture.

‘Not to tell me what you could, Mr Chenery, about the young man who was wearing the ring!’ he said. ‘You knew that I was in charge of the case—especially placed in charge of it at Mr Pontifex’s express request.’

Jocelyn looked at him again—again doubtfully. Marillier, it was plain, had some notion in his mind.

‘I don’t see that I could have helped you,’ he said.

Marillier’s air of injury increased. He looked as if he had been personally aggrieved.

‘Now, Mr Chenery!’ he said. ‘You know what an important clue that ring is. You come, accidentally, across a stranger who is wearing its very narrow; you set your man to track him down, and boast to me that he’ll do it, and yet you keep your information from me. I don’t call that fair, sir.’

‘Suppose I had no information to give you?’ said Jocelyn.

Marillier smiled and waved his hand.

‘Will you answer me a plain question or two, Mr Chenery?’ he asked. ‘I assure you it’s in Mr Pontifex’s interest—and perhaps in even more serious interests—that I ask them, sir.’

‘Yes,’ replied Jocelyn, wearily. ‘Ask what you like.’

‘Very good, sir,’ said Marillier, with alacrity. ‘There was a gentleman of the name of Rederdale died with strange suddenness in your rooms last week.’

‘Yes,’ answered Jocelyn.

‘Now, sir, wasn’t that the gentleman whom you travelled with from Southampton to Waterloo a few days previously—the gentleman who was wearing the ring?’ asked Marillier, eyeing him keenly.

‘Yes,’ replied Jocelyn. ‘That is so. May I ask you how you came to think so?’

‘I didn’t think so, sir—I knew it,’ replied Marillier with a sly laugh. ‘One of my men who knows you very well, Mr Chenery, happened to be on the platform at Waterloo when you arrived and saw you leave a first-class smoking compartment which you had shared with this gentleman. He recognised him when he saw his picture in the Daily Looking-Glass at the time of the inquest.’

'Well?' said Jocelyn.

'You said in your evidence, Mr Chenery, that you met this Mr Rederdale casually, at the house of the Italian gentleman Signor Vespucci, in St John's Wood, on the night of his death, and that having left together you walked home together and went into your rooms, where he died suddenly,' continued Marillier. 'Now, sir, be frank with me, for I can assure you that much depends upon it; did you have any conversation with that young gentleman about the ring you had seen him wearing, and was he wearing it then? I know he wasn't wearing it in the mortuary,' added Marillier, 'for I saw the body within two hours of his death.'

Marillier bent forward in his anxiety and eagerness.

'Yes, Mr Chenery, yes!' he said. 'What did he tell you, sir?'

'He told me,' replied Jocelyn, 'that he had seen the ring in a shop in Paris and had bought it out of curiosity, and that when he returned from Paris, where he had been on business for Signor Vespucci, that gentleman took a fancy to the ring, as being identical with one which a former friend had worn; wherefore Rederdale gave it to him.'

Marillier rubbed his hands. He smiled like a man who has discovered something precious. His voice became more confidential.

'Mr Chenery!' he said insinuatingly, 'we all know what the doctors said at the inquest on Rederdale, but I wasn't satisfied. Were you, sir?'

'No!' replied Jocelyn, who was now minded to share his thoughts with the detective. 'No, I was not.'

'You thought there was foul play, sir?' said Marillier, still rubbing his hands and smiling.

'Yes, I did—and I do,' assented Jocelyn.

Marillier laughed softly and nodded his head several times. He drew nearer to Jocelyn, and in his eagerness tapped him on the knee.

'Ah!' he said. 'Ah! You did and you do, Mr Chenery. Ay, and so do I. Listen, Mr Chenery, and I'll tell you my theory. That man, whoever he was, who waylaid Mr Pontifex at Somerbourne Manor, spoke of being one of three. There's three men always meeting at that Villa Firenza—there's Signor Vespucci himself; there's a German, one von Schleinitz; there's an American, John Hadley. Vespucci's known as a very rich man who amuses himself with science; von Schleinitz is ostensibly a student at University College; Hadley is a patent agent with an office in Norfolk Street. It's my belief that those are the three, and that they put Rederdale out of the way.

Now, consider: one of them—either Hadley or von Schleinitz, since Vespucci is a cripple—did that job at Somerbourne and dropped that ring there. Rederdale finds a similar ring and shows it to Vespucci, who promptly secures it. Why? Because he knows that the other ring will have been found at Somerbourne, and that sooner or later attention would be drawn to Rederdale if he wore a facsimile of it. Then they get the notion that perhaps Rederdale may hear of that Somerbourne affair and the ring found there—so they silence him. That young man, Mr Chenery, was murdered, sir!'

'But how—how, Marillier?' asked Jocelyn.

'How were those cattle killed, sir?' said the detective, looking earnestly in his listener's face. 'Ah, let's be finding out! Mr Chenery, I've seen a good deal of mystery in my life; I'll stake my reputation that the secret of this affair is all in that house in St John's Wood. I don't see my way clear yet, but—I'll get there. I'll ask you, sir, to respect my confidence, as I'll respect yours, but in future, if you see or hear anything, Mr Chenery, let me know.'

Then Marillier went away, leaving Jocelyn more mystified and troubled than ever.

5

At Lesbia's request Jocelyn had remained at Downing Street from the time of their return from Lady Sternwold's garden-party, and in consequence of the Prime Minister's illness he had found his time fully occupied, not so much with political as with domestic business. It was an open secret that he was to be Mr Pontifex's son-in-law; and upon him developed the duty of seeing the more important of the perpetual stream of callers who required personal information as to the Prime Minister's condition. From the Saturday evening which saw Mr Pontifex's unfortunate seizure, until the Tuesday afternoon on which Marillier called to see him, Jocelyn had not left the house. Feeling, when the detective had gone, that he must really breathe some fresh air, he made arrangements for a brief absence and went out into St James's Park. He realised then that he had a headache and that he was feeling tired and worn. The recent interview with the detective had only served to trouble and perplex him. It seemed to him that there was a shadow ahead, behind which many terrible possibilities might lie.

Was it possible, he wondered, as he strolled slowly along with bent head amongst the nursemaids and the loungers, that he had been the guest and the associate of cool and callous murderers? He could scarcely believe it. He recalled the pleasant refinement of his surroundings at the Villa Firenza, the charm of Signor Vespucci's conversation, the many indications of learning and of taste. Certainly there had been the incident of the vivisected dog. Jocelyn, as a devoted lover of dogs and horses, could not view that with anything but feelings of repulsion and disgust. But he was sufficiently man of the world to know that there were two opinions on that particular question and that many famous men, celebrated for their virtues and their humanity, defended vivisection on very serious grounds. No—he could scarcely bring himself to believe that Vespucci had any hand in the death of

Rederdale; his surprise at the news, Jocelyn felt more and more convinced, had been genuine, and his regret real.

But what of von Schleinitz? Jealousy is of all human passions the most difficult to conceal. It is the most animal, as it is the most uncontrollable of all our instincts. Jocelyn never remembered to have seen it so clearly expressed as in the case of those momentary flashes of the German's eyes. They were the eyes of a tiger. If their expression was anything to judge by, von Schleinitz at that time was capable of tearing and rending whatever aroused his anger; he was no longer a sane man, but a ravening beast. And yet—as if to prove that he had control over his feelings—those eyes within the fraction of a second became calm, unconcerned, cold.

Looking neither to the right nor the left in his aimless progress along the tree-shaded walk, Jocelyn was suddenly arrested by a voice at his side which, in a tone that woke some recollection in him, pleasantly wished him good day. Turning quickly, he recognised the American, John Hadley, whom he had found with Vespucci and von Schleinitz when he went to break the news of Rederdale's death. The man's face was so candid, his manner so ingenuous, that Jocelyn mechanically and instinctively took the hand which he held out.

'Good afternoon,' he said. 'I beg your pardon if I seemed absorbed—I was thinking deeply.'

'Sure!' said Hadley, with a smile. 'I saw you were. Not thinking still about that sad affair of poor Rederdale's, I hope, Mr Chenery?'

'To tell you the truth, I was,' replied Jocelyn, looking at him closely. 'I was thinking a good deal about it.'

The American nodded, and drawing out his cigarette-case offered its contents to Jocelyn in a free and easy manner characteristic of his nationality.

'Yes,' he said, giving Jocelyn a light and taking a cigarette himself. 'I guess that was an affair that would give a man a great lot to think about. It must have been a very upsetting affair for you, Mr Chenery. I read all about it in the papers. It must have knocked you and that valet of yours pretty well over to see another man go out like that.'

'Yes,' replied Jocelyn, 'yes.'

'Now, I only came across that poor fellow Rederdale a few times,' continued Hadley, who was evidently the sort of man who is always inclined to free converse with anybody and on all occasions. 'I met him just casually at

Vespucci's and whatever those doctors may say, I'd never have thought he'd have gone that quick… Eh?'

'The medical evidence seemed to be conclusive,' replied Jocelyn.

'Just so,' said Hadley, swinging his umbrella with an airy grace. 'It's mighty wonderful how doctors can agree. All the same, Rederdale was a strong man—I've seen him do some feats of strength there at Vespucci's laboratory that I couldn't do, and I'm no weakling.'

Jocelyn suddenly felt his innate sense of curiosity aroused. He had been surprised to be accosted by Hadley; he was still more surprised to find him talking of Rederdale and his death in this frank and palpably unaffected way. He wanted to know more—and when Jocelyn Chenery wanted to know more he generally got what he wanted.

'Let us sit down,' he said, pointing to two chairs which stood side by side under the trees at a little distance from the path. 'I am rather tired, and though I need fresh air I'd rather take it sitting. So you only knew Rederdale slightly?' he asked when they had taken their seats. 'You hadn't met him often?'

'Oh, a dozen to twenty times, I suppose,' said Hadley. 'He used to drop in at Vespucci's sometimes when I was there, or I used to drop in when he was there. He was a nice, pleasant, affable fellow, and I was sorry to hear of his death.'

This man had no hand in that death, thought Jocelyn, unless he is the most consummate adept at the game of bluff which the world has ever known. An idea suddenly struck him; he drew out Rederdale's cigarette-case, and opening it pointed to the cigarette to which he attached such importance.

'If you read the account of the inquest,' he said, 'you will remember that Rederdale died in the very act of lighting a cigarette. That is the cigarette.'

He was watching the American's face narrowly as he spoke, and he knew him to be innocent of any complicity in Rederdale's murder, if murder it was. Hadley showed nothing but a genuine surprise, a sort of boyish wonder. He took the cigarette-case in his hands, almost as reverently as if it had been a relic, and looked it all over with obvious curiosity.

'Is that so?' he said in a hushed voice. 'The very cigarette he was just lighting! You're going to keep it as a sort of relic?'

'His brother gave me the case as a memento,' answered Jocelyn, resuming possession and depositing the case in his pocket again. 'Yes, I

shall keep it.'

The American nodded and remained silent for a few moments. 'I'm glad I wasn't in your place that night,' he said. 'I wouldn't like to see a fellow-man go out like that.'

Jocelyn drew his bow at a venture.

'I met Miss Vespucci at a garden-party on Saturday,' he said. 'She was in remarkably good spirits.'

Hadley glanced at him uncomprehendingly.

'Why, Miss Vespucci is always in good spirits,' he said. 'I never knew her when she wasn't.'

'I thought Rederdale's death would have upset her,' said Jocelyn.

Hadley prodded holes in the ground with the ferrule of his neatly-rolled umbrella.

'Well, now, I guess it would,' he said reflectively. 'That is for twenty-four hours or so. Not that I mean Miss Pepita is shallow-hearted—far from it!—but she is essentially a child of the sun. She would shed tears for her friend and feel them—but she would soon be laughing again.'

'From what I saw that evening I came to the conclusion that Rederdale and the signorina were rather fond of each other,' said Jocelyn, still fishing for information. 'In fact, I wondered if they were—well, lovers.'

Hadley laughed.

'Oh, no!' he said. 'Of course I know what you mean. But Rederdale was merely the sort of tame cat about the house—free to come and go as he liked. Besides, Signorina Pepita is engaged to be married.'

'Oh!' said Jocelyn, blankly. 'Indeed!'

'Yes, and to a very clever young fellow—a former pupil of her uncle's, a Dr Kressler,' replied Hadley. 'You didn't meet him there, then? He's a professor, or demonstrator, or something, at your Natural Science College right here in London.'

'I have only visited Signor Vespucci on that one occasion,' said Jocelyn, who was wondering at this last piece of information. 'I should scarcely have thought that the signorina would have been attracted to a scientific man,' he added reflectively.

'Oh, Kressler is by no means a dry-as-dust!' observed Hadley. 'He is a lively young gentleman, for all his cleverness. You will be sure to meet him if you go there again. I'll be sure to see you myself there,' he concluded, throwing away his cigarette and rising. 'I drop in when I like—Vespucci is

a good host. Well, I'm off, Mr Chenery. I've an appointment in Buckingham Palace Road.'

He went away with his characteristic American nonchalance, swinging his umbrella, and left Jocelyn under the trees, more mystified than ever by the news he had heard and the impression Hadley had given him. He was astonished to hear of Pepita's engagement—yet he knew no good reason why he should be astonished, except that he had thought her almost affectionate in her manner towards Rederdale. What had most impressed him during this chance encounter and conversation was the manner and character of Hadley. It was impossible to believe that whatever Marillier might imagine to be going on at the Villa Firenza, Hadley had anything to do with it. If the mysterious Three had a corporate existence, Jocelyn could not bring himself to think that the American was one of them. And he was half-minded to go there and then to Marillier and to tell him that he was on the wrong track.

Instead, remembering that he wished to give some orders to Jannaway, he left the Park and drove round to Down Street. Jannaway presented him with a note which had just been brought by a district messenger; a moment later and he would have sent it on to the Prime Minister's. Jocelyn, recognising Vespucci's handwriting, tore it open. It was a polite invitation to him to visit the Villa Firenza that evening to witness a most interesting experiment which was to be made in the laboratory by Dr Herman Kressler—'my niece's fiancé,' added the signor.

Jocelyn suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to visit this mysterious house again. He rang Lesbia up on the telephone and had a conversation with her. Lesbia advised him to accept Signor Vespucci's invitation, but asked him to return to Downing Street that night. As to her father, she said, he still lay there unable to speak.

6

Jocelyn entered the garden of the Villa Firenza with feelings which he found it difficult to analyse. The trees, the flowers, the smooth lawn were all as charming as before; the roses of the pergola were as full of delicious fragrance. But it seemed to him that Rederdale's ghost was at his side, and he could not shake off a feeling of melancholy, which was mingled with one of strange apprehension—apprehension which he could not account for.

Pepita, bewitching as ever, received him in the drawing room, where he found her alone.

'My uncle is talking business with Dr Kressler,' she said as she gave him her hand. 'They will not be long. You have not met Dr Kressler. He is dreadfully clever, Mr Chenery. Tonight he is going to show us some wonderful experiment which I shall most certainly not understand. However, as Dr Kressler is my fiancé, I shall try not to yawn. After all, Herman is always interesting with his demonstrations and his experiments—which my dear uncle is not. Ah, how tired I get sometimes in the laboratory, Mr Chenery! The poor uncle, you see, must have an audience.'

Jocelyn studied Pepita as a new type. She seemed the quintessence of light-heartedness.

'I was not aware until this afternoon that you were betrothed, signorina,' he said. 'Permit me to offer you my sincere wishes for your happiness.'

Pepita made him a curtsey.

'You say that so nicely, Mr Chenery, that I feel you mean it,' she said. 'Thank you. Oh, yes—Herman and I have been what you English call engaged for a whole year. I used to think that I should marry a pirate king or a brigand with dark eyes and a fierce moustache, instead of a yellow-haired demonstrator in physics. However, I daresay we shall do very well. I have a beautiful temper, Mr Chenery—except at times.'

‘I am sure you preserved it wonderfully, signorina, on the occasion of our first meeting,’ said Jocelyn.

‘Did I not?—and under such provocation, too!’ exclaimed Pepita. ‘My poor Biondello! And your poor hand, Mr Chenery? It is quite healed?’

‘Oh, quite, signorina!’ Jocelyn answered with a glance at the injured member.

‘And you will not suddenly go mad and bite somebody?’ she asked. ‘That would be so unpleasant.’

Jocelyn turned from the girl’s light-hearted chatter to greet his host, who emerged at that moment from the inner drawing room. Signor Vespucci’s chair was propelled by a young gentleman, whom Jocelyn at once took to be Pepita’s future husband, and he examined him with curiosity. Dr Herman Kressler had nothing of the typical scientist about him; he neither wore doubtful linen nor spectacles; he was smartly dressed and looked alert; Jocelyn would have put him down as a soldier rather than a chemist. He had a military carriage and a military moustache; his steel-blue eyes looked more like gazing across fields of battle than into crucibles. He further proved to be of a gay and pleasant temperament, and Jocelyn was rejoiced to find that the remarkable experiment which he was to be privileged to witness had nothing to do with vivisection, but was merely a demonstration of certain scientific truths at which Kressler and Vespucci had been working for some time.

Pepita and her fiancé moved off to the laboratory together; Jocelyn volunteered to propel his host’s wheeled chair there. Vespucci thanked him cordially; his manner grew increasingly confidential.

‘I have been sorry to learn from the papers that the Prime Minister is indisposed,’ he said as they went across the garden. ‘I trust the illness is not serious, Mr Chenery? The newspapers,’ he added, with a laugh, ‘do not always give us the full news—especially of the highly-placed.’

‘Mr Pontifex needs rest and quiet,’ answered Jocelyn, guardedly. ‘He has lately been overworked.’

‘A wonderful man!’ said Vespucci. ‘I have followed his career with interest for many years. It is to be hoped that his arduous life has not overtaxed his strength. So many of our really great men in modern life have found the period of life between fifty and fifty-five a difficult one to bridge.’

‘Oh, I’ve no doubt the Premier will be all right again in a day or two,’ said Jocelyn, affecting a cheerful optimism which he was far from feeling.

‘Those late nights in the House are responsible for a lot of that sort of thing—you can’t go on working in that way without getting a bit knocked over, you know.’

‘And the knocking over is often of a very sudden nature,’ said the Italian. ‘It comes upon a man unawares—especially at that age.’

Jocelyn made no particular reply or remark. He was still in a cloud of doubt and wonder about Vespucci and his environment; for aught he knew the Italian might be anxious to find out what the exact truth was as to the state of Mr Pontifex’s health. And Jocelyn was not going to tell anything. His business at the Villa Firenza was to gain information, not to give it.

Hadley came in with von Schleinitz while the experiments were in progress. They nodded silently to the others and quietly took seats in a position from which they could watch the operator. Jocelyn, standing in the shadow behind Vespucci and Pepita, had an excellent chance of watching the young German. To his surprise he saw none of the strange jealousy in his eyes or expression which he had seen before; von Schleinitz was, to all appearance, calm and undisturbed, and his attention was riveted on all that Kressler said and did; at Pepita he scarcely looked. Afterwards, when they all left the laboratory, he proved to be in a genial mood and was quite unlike the von Schleinitz whom Jocelyn remembered. And once more he felt himself bewildered and uncertain.

Vespucci invited the men to whisky-and-soda; Pepita busied herself in producing cigars and cigarettes. Hadley, who was carrying an evening newspaper in his hand, looked at Jocelyn with an amused smile and tapped the page that lay uppermost.

‘Say!’ he said. ‘I see from this paper that you’re going to be one of the twenty favoured guests that Paul J. Milman is going to entertain at the Hotel Petronia tomorrow night.’

‘We were at Cambridge together,’ said Jocelyn.

‘Well, he and I were at Harvard together, before he came over here to your University,’ said Hadley. ‘He was always a lively sort of fellow, Milman, though I can’t say that I knew him very well. This seems to be a dandy sort of affair that’s giving at the Petronia.’

‘I’m afraid it will be,’ said Jocelyn. ‘Milman has ideas on that sort of subject.’

‘Sure!’ said Hadley. ‘Why, last fall he gave a similar dinner at Delmonico’s in New York—they said it was one of the finest stunts ever

known! The room in which they dined was fitted up like the interior of an ice-cave; all the guests were got up as Arctic explorers, and they'd real live polar bears and similar things in evidence. What's it going to be tomorrow night, Mr Chenery?'

'I don't know,' replied Jocelyn. 'I think it's to be by way of a surprise to everybody.'

'It'll be something great,' said Hadley. 'Paul J. Milman, Signor Vespucci, is one of our very young multi-millionaires (not a dollar millionaire, you know) who likes to give freak dinners with the money which old man Milman made in steel. You'll likely find that you've got to eat your dinner seated on the back of a camel or an elephant, Mr Chenery—Paul J.'s sure to have hit some queer notion.'

Jocelyn laughed and said he was quite prepared for anything where Milman was concerned. He soon afterwards took his leave; as he passed through the drawing room Pepita was singing, and Kressler was hanging over her just as Rederdale had hung over her on that fatal night. But von Schleinitz was in the smoking room, talking volubly to Vespucci.

Jocelyn went straight to Downing Street. There was no alteration in the Prime Minister's condition; the doctors thought him no worse and no better. But Lesbia was anxious and troubled about the strange look in his eyes, which indicated that he wanted to say something; there was in them, she said, the mute appeal of the dumb animal who is so desirous of conveying some news or impression and has no language in which to do it.

'What can it be, Jocelyn?' she said. 'I know there is something on his mind which is troubling him; though all the rest of him is as if it were dead, his eyes are so alive and they look at one so beseechingly.'

'There is nothing to be done,' said Jocelyn, sadly. 'The doctors say we can only wait. There may be a change tomorrow.'

But on the morrow Mr Pontifex lay in just the same condition, and it began to be a question as to how long the really serious nature of his attack could be kept from the public knowledge. There was no pressing necessity to let everybody know the exact state of affairs, however, and the physicians put out a bulletin similar to those which had informed the nation for three days that the Prime Minister was indisposed and confined to his room.

Jocelyn did not want to go to the young American millionaire's dinner at the Petronia. He had certainly been fond of Milman at Cambridge, and he had visited him at the palatial Milman residence on Fifth Avenue and shot

big game with him in the Rockies, but he would far rather have dined quietly with him than have gone to this freak dinner. Lesbia, however, insisted on his going; the complete change, she said, would do him good. So seven o'clock that night found Jocelyn at his rooms in Down Street making his toilet for the festive occasion which he devoutly hoped might not develop into a scene of high hilarity.

Jannaway came in with a note and laid it on the dressing table.

'Just brought by a district messenger, sir,' he said. 'There is no answer.'

Jocelyn finished dressing before he opened the note. The address on the envelope was typewritten; from the interior he drew out a sheet of blank paper. Puzzled, he held this closer to his eyes; a strange, curious odour crept to his nostrils. And suddenly he collapsed on the lounge at the foot of his bed, and a great wave of unconsciousness rolled over him and carried him away.

He woke again as suddenly as he had gone to sleep—woke to find the June daylight streaming in through his windows and Jannaway standing by his bedside. He started up, in full possession of his senses, alert, clear-headed, and stared at the valet, who watched him with grave, wondering eyes.

'Good Heavens, Jannaway, what's all this?' he exclaimed. 'It—it isn't morning? I have some recollection of dropping off to sleep on the sofa.'

'You did, sir, and it is morning,' replied Jannaway. 'I found you fast asleep when I came to tell you the car was outside, and as I couldn't wake you I sent for the doctor. He said you were drugged, sir, and we put you to bed.'

'I—drugged?' said Jocelyn. 'Drugged!'

'That's what the doctor said, sir,' replied the valet. 'He's been in three times during the night, but he said you'd wake all right and I was to give you some brandy-and-soda as soon as you did. Here it is, sir.'

Jocelyn mechanically drank off the fizzing compound which Jannaway handed him and tried to comprehend matters.

'Then—then I never went to the Petronia?' he said.

'No, sir,' replied the valet. 'You did not. And a good thing you didn't, sir.'

Jocelyn stared at him more than ever. Jannaway produced a morning newspaper.

'It's all there, sir,' he said. 'Mr Milman and his guests are all dead—dead, sir! And they seem to have died just as we saw Mr Rederdale die. Mr Chenery, sir—it's murder!'

Part 4

The Affair at the Hotel Petronia

1

Scarcely comprehending what Jannaway was talking about, and all his previous clear-headedness dispersed by the valet's ominous words, Jocelyn took the newspaper and looked at the big black headlines, at which Jannaway pointed a trembling finger. One brief glance forced an exclamation of horror to his lips: the great capitals standing in isolated, well-leaded lines burnt themselves in upon his brain.

'Extraordinary Affair at the Hotel Petronia.
Instantaneous and Simultaneous Death of
Nineteen Persons.
Panic at the Hotel.
Absence of Any Clue or Theory.
Was It Wholesale Murder?'

Jocelyn let the newspaper slip from his hands. He felt as if the world were suddenly dissolving about him; a physical and moral sickness came over him. With a great effort he pulled himself together and found the valet watching him anxiously.

'Jannaway!' he said. 'Have—have you let Miss Pontifex know that I am safe?'

Jannaway nodded reassuringly.

'Miss Pontifex has been here, sir,' he answered. 'I telephoned to her last night after the doctor had been and she came round at once. She was here again first thing this morning with the doctor. As he said that you would be all right after you woke, sir, Miss Pontifex begged that you would go there when you had breakfasted. Mr Pontifex has regained his speech, sir, and has asked for you.'

‘Let me see what this is all about,’ said Jocelyn, and seized the newspaper again. And as Jannaway left the room he began to read the account of what he felt sure to be the second manifestation of that awful power of destruction which he had previously seen practised, first on dumb animals and then on an apparently innocent man.

> ‘Last night about ten o’clock,’ ran the newspaper account in its big-lettered, spaced-out summary, ‘a terrible affair occurred at the Hotel Petronia, the origin and meaning of which is so far an absolute mystery.
>
> ‘It involved the sudden, instantaneous, simultaneous death of no less than nineteen persons.
>
> ‘The victims were Mr Paul J. Milman, a well-known young American millionaire, and eighteen of his friends, who were taking part with him in a private dinner-party.
>
> ‘The tragedy is supposed to have happened just after ten o’clock, when, dinner being over, all the waiters were dismissed and the host and guests left to themselves.
>
> ‘No sound coming from the suite of rooms which Mr Milman had engaged, an entrance was effected at half-past ten by the management of the hotel.
>
> ‘Mr Milman and his guests were found dead. According to the medical men who were hastily summoned, death in each case had occurred about twenty to twenty-five minutes before the discovery was made.
>
> ‘Up to the time of our going to press no explanation of the cause of this terrible affair has been given by the authorities. We are in a position to state, however, that no trace of any known poison has been discovered.
>
> ‘The names of the victims are as follows. They were all young men, personal friends of Mr Milman’s in this country and in the United States. It will be seen that some of the best families here and in America have suffered losses.
>
> ‘Mr Paul J. Milman, New York.
> ‘The Marquess of Marbury (eldest son of the Duke of Lichester).

‘The Earl of Prade (eldest son of the Marquess of Wellbridge).
‘Viscount Normanstone.
‘Sir John Ringe.
‘The Honourable Arthur Trail (third son of Lord Brimford).
‘Mr C. F. D. Hampsford (the well-known cricketer).
‘Mr V. T. Templemain.
‘Captain Cyril Medhurst (59th Hussars).
‘Lieutenant W. D. Maxwell (The King’s Own—Oakshire Light Infantry).
‘Mr Cyrus P. Quinn, New York.
‘Mr William Hurlbert, New York.
‘Mr Thomas B. Evermead, Boston.
‘Mr Aloysius Xavier Murphy, Chicago.
‘Mr Steadman Broome, Philadelphia.
‘Mr Peter Cornelius, St Louis.
‘Mr Jeremiah O’Sullivan, Chicago.
‘Mr Desmond Fitzgerald, New York.
‘Mr Arthur B. Wybrowe, Detroit.

‘There should have been nineteen guests. Fortunately for himself, the Honourable Jocelyn Chenery, third son of the Earl of Hadminstowe, and one of the Prime Minister’s private secretaries, was prevented by indisposition from attending what proved to be a veritable death feast.’

Jocelyn dropped the newspaper from his shaking hands and groaned aloud. So far, he had not a single feeling with respect to his own escape; all his thoughts were of the nineteen who had been snatched out of hearty and vigorous life into cold and unrelenting death without a moment’s, a second’s warning. Jocelyn knew every one of the nineteen—some of them extremely well, all of them with more or less intimacy. They were all young—Medhurst, he reflected, was the eldest, and Medhurst was only twenty-eight—all light-hearted, all fond of the gaiety and joy of life. And they were—dead! Dead—and, as he knew well, murdered! Jannaway, with his

sharp Cockney wit, had hit the nail on the head. It was murder. He picked up the newspaper again and read the detailed account.

> 'The terrible catastrophe (if that be the fitting word to use in relation to an occurrence which is unparalleled so far as mystery is concerned) at the Hotel Petronia last night,' ran the account, 'will produce a sensation, not only in two continents, but all over the world, which will last much longer than the proverbial nine days. Nineteen young men, all in the highest of spirits and the best of health, were stricken to death at the same moment as they sat at the table whereon they had just dined. The experts who have been called in can give no reason whatever for this wholesale destruction or forfeiture of life; the preliminary investigation has shown no trace of any known poison; one great authority emphatically declares that no living toxicologist is acquainted with any poison which could produce this terrible result. What, then, was the cause of the sudden, simultaneous death of this party of nineteen young men, who but a few moments before they expired with such awful rapidity were known to be in the very height of health and spirits? If this death lies at the hand of some subtle and malignant enemy, then Society is face to face with the most sinister secret force of which the human race has ever had cognizance.
>
> 'The bare facts which led up to this unique occurrence are simple. Mr Paul J. Milman, the young American gentleman who was last night's host, was well known on both sides of the Atlantic. He succeeded in his boyhood to the vast fortune left by his father, John H. Milman, of Pittsburgh, who had made several millions in steel. Paul J. Milman was an only child, and when he attained his majority he came into possession of an enormous sum of money. After a period of residence at Harvard University he came over to this country and spent a few terms at Trinity College, Cambridge. Very fond of life and of gaiety, he was entirely without any liking for the lower kinds of amusement, and devoted himself chiefly to the Turf, to polo and to yachting. His only weakness in the way of bizarre pleasure was a penchant for giving freak dinners and somewhat

original fancy-dress balls, and some of his achievements in this way have from time to time been the talk of London and of New York. He was a cheery, kind-hearted, open-handed young man, singularly unaffected and simple, and he made friends wherever he went.

'Mr Milman always came over to this country for the London season, and he has been in town since the end of April. During May he was much in evidence on the Turf, and it will be remembered that he scored successes at Newmarket, at Kempton Park, at Doncaster and in Paris, where his horse, Alabama the Second, carried off the Prix Rochette three weeks ago. Recently Mr Milman determined to give one of his celebrated dinners to his most intimate friends, and he limited the number of invitations to nineteen. Very little was made known to anyone as to what character this dinner would assume; the guests themselves were kept in ignorance of what was in store for them.

'When in town Mr Milman resided in Park Lane, in a house which he rented from Lord Athlingsea every year, but for the scene of his latest—and, as it has been proved to be, his last—freak dinner he selected the Hotel Petronia, the most recent addition to London's modern caravanserais, which, as everyone knows, has filled up all that was left vacant of Kingsway and added another to the more remarkable of the great architectural buildings of the Metropolis. In this huge hotel there are suites upon suites of rooms of all dimensions and all styles of decorating; Mr Milman had chosen one which comprised a reception-room, a dining room and a drawing room, all of considerable size. Never a man to do things by halves, the giver of this entertainment had laid himself out to surpass all his previous celebrations of the same character… What his original idea as to the nature of the event was no one will now ever know; what is known is, that instead of treating his bosom friends to eccentricity and freakishness, as usual, he was about to give them the opportunity, at enormous cost, of hearing the finest singer, the finest violinist and the finest pianist in the world. It was rumoured last night that to secure the services of Signor Marento,

who came specially from Florence, Signor Ynasi, who travelled post-haste from St Petersburg, and Monsieur St Evreux, now world-renowned as the undoubted successor of Paderewski, Mr Milman paid sums aggregating to well over ten thousand pounds.

'The preparations for the dinner were on the same elaborate scale of magnificence. Mr Magnier, the famous chef of the Petronia, formerly chef to H.I.M. the Carlovian Emperor, had carte blanche in respect of everything, and had been requested to surpass himself. A well-known firm of florists received an order for the decoration of the rooms, which involved an expenditure of at least three hundred pounds. As a memento of the occasion each guest was to receive a solid gold cigar case, with his initials and his host's initials in diamonds. Nothing that money could do was to be left undone; no such entertainment had certainly been arranged for at the Hotel Petronia since it was opened to the public twelve months ago.

'Mr Milman was yesterday afternoon playing polo at Ranelagh, two of his guests for the evening, Lord Marbury and Captain Medhurst, being on his side in a game between the Rovers and the Brigade of Guards, which was won by the latter by five goals to three. At six o'clock he called at the Hotel Petronia to see that all was in order, and thence he proceeded to the Hotel Cecil to call on M. St Evreux, and subsequently to the Hotel Ritz, where Signor Marento and Signor Ynasi are staying. He then drove to Park Lane to make his toilet, and at twenty minutes to eight was back at the Hotel Petronia to receive his guests. Soon after his arrival a telephone message from Mr Jocelyn Chenery's valet informed him that Mr Chenery had been taken suddenly ill and could not attend. This was a great disappointment to Mr Milman, but by eight o'clock all his other guests had arrived, and dinner was immediately served.

'According to the testimony of the members of the special staff who were on duty during dinner, all the party were in capital spirits and the host was especially gay and cheerful. Everything passed off with the greatest éclat, the most com-

plete success. Shortly before ten o'clock coffee and liqueurs were served at table, and all the servants withdrew, the host having given directions that at this stage he should be left entirely alone with his guests. None of the nineteen unfortunate young men were seen alive again.

'At ten o'clock precisely Signor Marento and Signor Ynasi arrived at the Hotel Petronia and were shown to the drawing room specially set apart for them and M. St Evreux, who drove up a few minutes later. The large drawing room, which communicated with the dining room, had been transformed into a miniature opera-house; Mr Henry Foulds, the most accomplished accompanist in London, was present to accompany the famous tenor and, where necessary, the world-renowned violinist. All these great artists waited; Mr Milman did not come to them. The servants who had been told off to attend in the metamorphosed drawing room remarked that no sounds reached them from the adjacent apartment where Mr Milman sat with his guests. Time passed on; at half-past ten, as Signor Marento was becoming impatient, Herr Leibnitz, the manager of the Hotel Petronia, took upon himself to enter the room.

'It was at once apparent that some awful tragedy had taken place. The nineteen young men had dined at a round table, magnificently decorated with flowers and plate, but so arranged that all could see each other. Each was furnished with a luxurious elbow chair; in these elbow chairs they now sat, or lounged, all statuesque and immovable. Some sat bolt upright, gripping the arms of the chairs and staring straight before them; others sat with heads drooping forward on their chests; one or two lay over the table, their heads resting on their folded arms. At the head of the table, Milman, half-lying, half-sitting, in his chair, had a strange expression on his face, which seemed to suggest that he had suddenly seen and recognised something.

'Every member of the party was dead. That each had died instantaneously there could be no doubt. Here a dead hand grasped a coffee cup; there dead fingers twined about the stem of a liqueur glass. One man still held a cigar in one hand, a match in the other; most of the party had cigarettes between

their fingers. That death must have been incredibly swift seems to be proved from the fact that in the case of Captain Medhurst a cigarette was still between the dead man's lips, and that he had expired in the very act of handing a light to his left-hand neighbour, Mr Evermead.

'To say that this most extraordinary discovery aroused terror and amazement amongst those who were first on the scene (amongst whom were the three famous artists whose services Mr Milman had secured at such cost) is to present the truth in very mild form. There seemed, for the moment, the danger of a terrible panic. Fortunately Herr Leibnitz is a man of resource and determination; he succeeded in calming the attendants, and enjoining strict secrecy on all present, had the entire suite of rooms closed and guarded until the arrival of the police and the doctors, for whom he at once telephoned.

'Within a very few minutes certain of the high officials from New Scotland Yard were present, and with them, or immediately afterwards, came Professor Acheson of the Home Office, who has a world-wide reputation as an expert on poison, Dr Maidstone, the eminent experimentalist, and Sir Thomas Didsbury. Great secrecy was maintained by the police, but we understand that the bodies of the nineteen unfortunate young gentlemen were laid out in the drawing room in which they were to have enjoyed the unique concert provided for them, and that their various relatives were at once communicated with.

'It has also been officially announced that as a result of the preliminary examinations made by the doctors and of one particular autopsy, immediately carried out on one of the victims at the urgent request of relatives, no trace whatever of any known poison has been found.

'The cause of this sudden wholesale destruction of life is therefore at present an absolute mystery.'

Jocelyn laid the paper aside. He must rise; he must dress; he must go out. The time had come for action, swift and resolute.

2

In his sickroom at Downing Street the Prime Minister had at last regained the use of his tongue. He spoke haltingly, feebly, indistinctly, but he spoke. In the early morning of the night which witnessed the terrible affair at the Hotel Petronia' the nurse roused Lesbia with the news that Mr Pontifex had spoken and had asked for her. Lesbia hastened to the bedside and hung over the stricken man, anxious and afraid. With the return of the power of speech had come the use of his hands; he felt for and pressed her fingers; his eyes motioned her to approach her face nearer to his.

'What day is this?' he whispered.

Lesbia, all unconscious of the secret in Mr Pontifex's mind, knew no reason why she should not answer this question.

'It is Thursday morning, father,' she replied.

The Prime Minister's brows knitted.

'It was Saturday that we were at Wimbledon?' he said anxiously. 'Was it last Saturday?'

'It was last Saturday, father,' she answered. 'Never mind that now. Perhaps you ought not to talk. Don't until Dr Roberts has seen you. I am just going to telephone to him.'

But Mr Pontifex held fast his daughter's hand. His lips moved. 'Saturday—Thursday,' he said in his weak voice. 'One—two—three—four. Then yesterday was the fourth day—the fourth! Lesbia!'

'Yes, father?' she said, bending closer to him as he tightened his grip on her fingers. 'Yes?'

'Lesbia—has anything happened?' he asked. 'Anything?'

Lesbia did not understand him. She knew nothing of his meeting with the emissary of the Three at Lady Sternwold's garden-party; nothing of the directions as to where the ten millions of ransom was to be paid, which he

had destroyed. Alas, up to then she was ignorant of the catastrophe to Milman and his guests. She accordingly answered him readily.

'Nothing, father, except that you have been ill and that you are better,' she said. 'Now please don't talk again until the doctor comes—he told me to send for him as soon as you spoke.'

But Mr Pontifex searched her face with questioning, troubled eyes.

'You're sure nothing has happened?' he said again. 'Sure, Lesbia?'

'I'm certain, father,' she said. 'Now, please do what I wish.'

His grip on her fingers relaxed and she turned away, intent on summoning the doctor who had been in closest attendance on the patient. But before she could leave the room Mr Pontifex spoke again.

'You are sure that this is Thursday and that nothing has happened?' he said with the half-querulous iteration of the sick man. 'Sure, Lesbia, sure?'

Lesbia hastily whispered the nurse to go to the telephone and ring up Dr Roberts; she herself returned to her father's bedside and sat down there.

'Yes, father,' she assured him again. 'I am quite sure that nothing has happened. Except for your illness everything has gone on all right. Don't talk, father, until the doctor has seen you—he will be here in a few minutes.'

Mr Pontifex, letting the hand which she had taken rest in hers, closed his eyes, and for a time remained quiet and silent. But in a little while his eyelids lifted again and he looked at his daughter with the anxious look which she could not understand.

'Where is Jocelyn Chenery?' he asked. 'I want Chenery—at once.'

'Jocelyn is not very well, father,' replied Lesbia, 'but he will be here in the morning. He has been with you a great deal during your illness.'

Mr Pontifex did not seem to pay any particular attention to this statement, and he presently reiterated his previous remark about the fourth day. It became plain to Lesbia that there was something on his mind about that fourth day, and she was thankful when the doctor came; still more thankful when the eminent specialist who had been called in as consultant followed him a few moments later.

Lesbia left the physicians with her father and awaited them in another room. It seemed a long, long time before they came to her, and she was immediately aware that both looked unusually grave. Her eyes questioned them silently.

‘Your father is now asleep, Miss Pontifex,’ said the great man. ‘We have administered a soothing draught and he will probably sleep for some hours. Now, my dear young lady, your father has something on his mind that is troubling him. He is anxious to know if anything happened yesterday—the fourth day, as he terms it.’

‘Yes,’ said Lesbia. ‘He has been asking me that—over and over again. I do not know what he means.’

‘It is evident that he expected, indeed, has been in fear of some event of yesterday,’ said the doctor. ‘Have you any idea of what that refers to?’

‘None,’ replied Lesbia. ‘None whatever.’

The two doctors looked at each other. The elder man motioned Lesbia to sit down; both took seats.

‘You are not yet aware, Miss Pontifex, that a very terrible affair did happen last night in London?’ said the specialist. ‘A most extraordinary and horrible affair; an equally horrible mystery?’

Lesbia looked her inquiry.

‘It appears that a young American gentleman, a Mr Milman, was entertaining some personal friends at the Hotel Petronia,’ continued the specialist. ‘It was an entertainment on a great scale, and—’

‘Yes, I know,’ interrupted Lesbia. ‘Mr Chenery was to go. But he was taken ill last night and could not.’

The great man, who to a solemn face added a more than usually solemn manner, lifted both hands.

‘A direct interposition of Providence!’ he said. ‘A most direct interposition. Miss Pontifex, all those unfortunate young gentlemen are—dead!’

Lesbia gazed at him in astonishment. And suddenly a suspicion of the truth flashed across her. The first threat—the death of the cattle—the warning that the next victim should be human—oh, this must be the second manifestation of that awful power! And Jocelyn had only just escaped! She turned faint, felt her senses swimming—and regained her self-control with a great effort.

‘Dead?’ she exclaimed. ‘Dead?’

‘They are all dead,’ answered the doctor, more solemnly than ever. ‘They were destroyed—destroyed in a moment. I was called in—I have seen their bodies. I pray God that I may never again be called upon to see such a sight. I cannot understand how they died. But, Miss Pontifex—do you think that this, this utterly unexplainable affair, has anything to do with the event

which your father appears to have expected on what he calls the fourth day—which seems to have been yesterday?'

Lesbia remained silent, staring blankly at the two old men. She had no doubt in her own mind as to what had happened—but she was torn and agitated by her speculations as to what her father could have known about it. She suddenly rose, holding out her hands as if in appeal.

'Please don't ask me anything!' she said. 'Please, please wait until—until I have seen Mr Chenery. If one of you would stay with my father until I return I will drive round to Down Street and see how Mr Chenery is. He—he knows something about this; he may know more than I do.'

'I am going to stay with Mr Pontifex,' said Dr Roberts.

Lesbia went round to Down Street; Jocelyn was still under the influence of the drug. His doctor assured her that he would be all right later in the morning, and she returned to Downing Street to await his arrival. When he came at ten o'clock the Prime Minister was still asleep. Lesbia took Jocelyn aside.

'I know everything about last night,' she said. 'Jocelyn, you will have to tell what you know. The two doctors are here, and Sir Philip Blackford, and Marillier want to see you at once. Listen—' and she gave him a short and clear account of her interview with the physicians and of her father's reiterated inquiries about the fourth day.

'Great Heavens!' exclaimed Jocelyn. 'He must have known something. What could it be that he knew? Lesbia, let me see the doctors at once.'

Greatly to his relief Jocelyn found, on going to the medical men, that Sir Philip Blackford had joined them. All three men looked unusually grave when the young private secretary entered the room in which they had been in consultation.

'In view of what occurred last night, Mr Chenery,' said the old judge, 'and considering the information which, as you know, Mr Pontifex put before me regarding the affair of the cattle at Somerbourne, I have taken upon myself to tell Sir Alfred Wilson and Dr Roberts of the secret which, I believe, has been confined so far to the Prime Minister and a very few people.'

'Yes?' said Jocelyn, wondering what was coming. 'Yes, Sir Philip.'

'From what Sir Alfred tells me, it seems probable that Mr Pontifex had some notion that the affair at the Hotel Petronia was to happen,' said Sir Philip. 'It appears that since recovering his speech he has perpetually asked

if anything occurred on what he refers to as the fourth day. Do you know anything of this, Mr Chenery?'

'Nothing,' replied Jocelyn. 'Nothing!'

Sir Philip looked at the doctors.

'Mr Pontifex will have to be told of last night's fatality,' he said. 'That is, of course, as soon as he is able to hear the news.'

'The probability is he will be benefited by having his mind set at rest,' said Sir Alfred Wilson.

Later in the morning the two doctors, Sir Philip Blackford and Jocelyn went to the Prime Minister's room. He was better and looked more like his old self—and he had thrice asked the same question—had anything happened on the fourth day—yesterday?

Sir Philip broke the news to him gently. There had been a terrible occurrence and the victims were dead. And if Mr Pontifex knew anything of it, had been warned of it, he must speak at once.

Mr Pontifex stared wildly at the faces around him. Too late the doctors saw that it had been a mistake to speak to him. He uttered a loud cry.

'Dead? And I—I could have saved them!'

Then his face suddenly grew ghastly and he fell back on his pillow.

The Prime Minister was dead.

PART 5

THE MILLIONAIRE FROM NOWHERE

1

During the first few hours which followed the sudden death of the Prime Minister confusion reigned supreme in official circles, and the first symptoms of panic began to show themselves in London. Rumour invariably follows hard on the heels of unbridled surmise, and it was soon whispered, and then shouted, all over the seven hundred square miles and amongst the seven millions of the over-grown metropolis that there existed in our midst an organisation which had the power of destroying life as easily as other people snuff out a candle. Very little business was transacted in the city; men gathered in groups and speculated wildly on the mystery. Great commercial magnates, great financial operators hurried to the Home Office, to Scotland Yard, to this or that principal Minister's door, frantically anxious to know what to expect and what was to be done. Everybody recognised that here was a greater, more deadly and insidious peril than could have resulted from the presence of an invading army.

To those nearest the centre of things the most fateful fact was the death of Mr Pontifex. It had been recognised by those present at his death that the Prime Minister not only knew that this blow was about to fall, but that he was aware of the exact date on which it was to be expected, and might have averted it had he so pleased. But it was fully recognised that the crime would only have been prevented by the payment of the ransom demanded, and a rapid search through the late Prime Minister's papers failed to reveal anything that could say where and when that ransom was to have been paid. Before afternoon a further complication arose in the shape of an anonymous communication delivered to the Home Secretary by hand, and received by him within two hours of the public announcement of Mr Pontifex's death in the special edition of the papers. Typewritten, and enclosed in a plain envelope, which, however, was marked 'Urgent,' it had been posted at the West

Strand post office in the ordinary way. The message it conveyed was brief and significant.

> 'While regretting the sudden death of Mr Pontifex, the persons with whom he has recently been in communication wish to point out to His Majesty's Government that the ultimatum delivered to the late Premier still remains in force. Unless the ransom demanded is paid before the end of the week, in the way specified to Mr Pontifex last Saturday, the occurrence of last night at the Hotel Petronia will be repeated, but on a much larger scale and with much more serious results.'

This communication arrived just as the Home Secretary was about to join in a conference which had been hastily summoned at Scotland Yard. Perhaps no such conference had ever sat around one table before; there was the specially-sent representative of the highest authority in the land; there were two or three Cabinet Ministers and the Lord Chancellor; the Governor of the Bank of England was there, and so was the head of the greatest financial firm in Europe; Professor Acheson was there with other medical experts; there, too, were Jocelyn Chenery, Inspector Marillier and Sir Philip Blackford. Most of those present had no idea of what they were to hear; they only guessed in a vague and shadowy way that London was face to face with some awful danger.

To Sir Philip Blackford, as the confidant of the dead Premier, was entrusted the task of briefly relating all that Mr Pontifex had told him of the strange occurrence at Somerbourne Manor, and of the threats of his mysterious emissary there, and subsequently in the document which had been placed in the old book. Jocelyn and Marillier corroborated these; Jocelyn narrated the episode of the ring and Rederdale, and since it could no longer be kept back, told of his experiences at the Villa Firenza. He laid special stress on the circumstances of Rederdale's death, but one of the medical men present, who had assisted in the autopsy on that unfortunate young man, immediately rose and declared most emphatically that Rederdale had most undoubtedly died of heart failure; that his heart was badly diseased, and that there was not a trace of poison anywhere about the body.

'Let us be practical,' said the great financier, when everything had been told. 'There is nothing whatever before us to show that young

Mr Rederdale's death had anything to do with the slaughter of the cattle or with this affair at the Hotel Petronia. What is certain is that these people have the whip hand of us. They can do what they like—they can dictate their own terms. Therefore they must be paid. Now, then, how and where and when is the money to be paid?'

The Home Secretary produced the typed letter.

'I received this just before I came here,' he said, handing it round. 'It will be observed that the senders state that Mr Pontifex was in possession of instructions as to the handing over of the money. But I have just learnt from Mr Chenery that although a careful search has been made amongst Mr Pontifex's more available papers, nothing has been found. Nothing, I think, Mr Chenery?'

'Nothing,' replied Jocelyn.

The financial magnate uttered an impatient sound.

'Then we are entirely in the dark!' he exclaimed. 'And we do not even know where to approach these people. When, Mr Chenery, do you suppose the late Premier heard from them as to this payment?'

'I think he must have had some communication from them after returning from Lady Sternwold's garden-party last Saturday,' replied Jocelyn, 'and it is my belief that it induced the seizure which proved fatal. But if he had such a communication he must have destroyed it immediately, for there is not a trace of it. And knowing Mr Pontifex as I did, I think that he probably memorised the instructions and then got rid of the paper or letters.'

'Well, that money will have to be paid,' said the great man. 'The first thing to do is to find out how, when and where.'

'Will not that be a confession of defeat, of failure?' said one of the gentlemen present. 'We might temporise, negotiate—'

'Tchut!' exclaimed the financial king. 'Temporise! Negotiate! Defeat! Of course we're defeated. You can't temporise or negotiate with a foe who's got his foot on your neck and his dagger at your heart! Impossible. Why, fancy what these people can do! If they did what they did last night in the case of those poor boys, what can't they do? They might destroy the Directors of the Bank of England; they might kill off the Houses of Parliament—they might—well, I won't say what they might not do, but you can all surmise what I have in mind. They are masters of the situation, these people, and we shall have to pay them.'

‘What guarantee shall we have that they will not make subsequent demands?’ asked another member of the conference. ‘If they can make us do what they like, I see no reason why they should limit their demands to ten millions sterling.’

The great financial magnate waved his hands.

‘We have got to pay,’ he said. ‘We must get into communication with these people at once.’

‘How?’ inquired the Home Secretary.

‘Through the public press,’ answered the financier. ‘There is no other way.’

‘If we tell the people of what we know we shall have a panic in London,’ remarked the Lord Chancellor.

‘There is a panic growing already,’ said the financier. ‘Unless this thing is stopped that panic will grow. You must advertise—at once.’

‘Then these people, these mysterious somebodies, who are callous and brutal murderers, are to receive ten millions of money and go scot-free?’ said the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The financial magnate shook his head impatiently.

‘Don’t you recognise,’ he said with some asperity, ‘that this is—War? It is War carried on by a knot of men against Society. They have got possession of some secret which gives them the power to destroy wholesale. Therefore they are our masters. Murder, very likely—but no more than Königgrätz and Sedan were murders. They are in the position to say, pretty significantly, “*Val victis*!” Don’t let us forget that.’

After a brooding silence, during which everybody seemed to be occupied with very unpleasant thoughts, the Home Secretary drew pen and paper towards him and began writing rapidly.

‘Perhaps we had better communicate with these people through the newspapers,’ he said. ‘How will this do?’

‘The persons who have recently been in communication with the late Prime Minister, and who appear to have made some definite communication to him last Saturday, are informed that no memorandum of this can be found, and that the Government is in ignorance of its purport. Those persons are therefore requested to repeat the instructions given to the late Premier to the Home Secretary, at his office, at once.’

‘Excellent!’ said the financial magnate. ‘It’s the only thing to be done.’

‘I will have copies of this sent round to all the newspapers at once,’ said the Home Secretary.

Many of those present rose as if to go.

‘What will be done as regards those persons in St John’s Wood, about whom, according to Mr Chenery’s statement, there seem to be suspicious circumstances connected with this affair?’ asked someone. ‘That matter of the ring, for example, is strange.’

‘To my mind there is something much stranger,’ said the Lord Chancellor. ‘Mr Chenery has told us that he was to attend Mr Milman’s dinner last night, and that he was mysteriously drugged. Now, in my opinion, whoever drugged him did so with the object of saving his life, knowing very well what was going to happen at the Hotel Petronia. Who could that have been?’

Every man in the room looked at Jocelyn, who, having no absolute knowledge of the truth, and not willing at that time to voice his suspicions (which were decidedly vague) kept silence and shook his head.

‘How many people, and what people in particular, Mr Chenery, knew that you were to be one of the guests at this dinner of Mr Milman’s?’ asked the Home Secretary.

‘A great many people may have known,’ replied Jocelyn. ‘There has been a list of the invited guests in the morning and evening papers for the last two days. The fact that I was going there was certainly mentioned at the Villa Firenza.’

‘I think I shall be justified in having some inquiries made at the Villa,’ said the Home Secretary, turning to the law officers and the representatives of the police. ‘Signor Vespucci might be invited to say if he knows anything, and to explain the affair of the ring, and—’

At this moment an official entered the room and gave the Home Secretary a message and a visiting-card. He glanced at the card and then looked in some astonishment round the room.

‘Oddly enough,’ he said, ‘the very man I have just mentioned is here, very anxious to see me. I mean Signor Vespucci. He sends word that it is of great importance I should see him at once. We will hear what he has to say.’

2

The twelve or fifteen men watched the door with great curiosity when the messenger retired to fetch Vespucci before the conference. None of them, except Jocelyn and Marillier, knew anything of the Italian; the mere possibility that he might in some way be connected with the frightful crime which had horrified two hemispheres gave him a certain fascination. There was not a sound as the door opened and the visitor entered.

Vespucci came into view in his wheeled chair, propelled by the messenger who had just brought in the cards. He looked at the assemblage into which he was introduced with as manifest a curiosity as that with which he was regarded. Recognising Jocelyn Chenery he gave him a pleasant bow; there was nothing in his appearance to indicate that any particular crime or consciousness of evil in general lay on his soul.

Amidst a profound silence the Home Secretary stepped forward to meet his caller.

'Signor Vespucci?' he said inquiringly, glancing at the man in the wheeled chair.

The Italian made a courteous inclination of the head. 'I am Signor Vespucci—at your service, sir,' he answered.

The Home Secretary acknowledged the salutation and motioned the messenger to place Vespucci's chair nearer the table, around which most of the eminent personages in the room were grouped.

'I understand from your message, Signor Vespucci, that you wish to speak to me on the subject of the occurrence of the Hotel Petronia last night,' he said.

Vespucci looked about him. 'Yes,' he answered, 'but I expected to be received in private, sir.'

The Home Secretary nodded.

‘Quite so,’ he said. ‘The truth is, signor, that this is an informal meeting of various important and highly-placed persons met together to consider the subject on which you wish to speak to me. You may tell me whatever it is you wish to tell with the utmost freedom. I may inform you that when you were announced we were discussing the sending of an official to ask you some questions, signor.’

Vespucci’s surprise was evident.

‘I, sir?’ he exclaimed.

‘We had some idea that you might know something of this affair, Signor Vespucci,’ said the Home Secretary, watching the Italian narrowly. ‘And it seems you do, as you have come to speak to me about it.’

The Italian looked at his questioner with increased surprise. ‘I believe that I can perhaps suggest something to you about it,’ he said. ‘That is why I am here. But I am utterly at a loss to understand how you could connect an obscure individual like myself, a crippled man, with this matter.’

‘It has been reported to us that you are an extremely clever experimentalist in science, Signor Vespucci,’ said the Home Secretary.

Vespucci looked slowly at Jocelyn Chenery. ‘I see here a gentleman who has been my guest,’ he said. ‘I have certainly shown him over my laboratory.’

‘We did not receive our information, in the first instance, from Mr Chenery,’ said the Home Secretary. ‘He has not, pray be assured, done anything to infringe the laws of hospitality. We heard of you—elsewhere.’

‘That may be,’ said Vespucci. ‘I have never made any secret of the fact that I experiment—it is all I can do in my state. Did the rumour of that fact make you think that I had some connection with this wholesale slaughter, sir?’

The Home Secretary whispered for a moment with the Lord Chancellor. The latter turned to Vespucci with something like an ingratiating smile.

‘As you came to volunteer some information, Signor Vespucci,’ he said, ‘perhaps—’

But Vespucci lifted his hand.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I have no information. I came to make a most important statement and suggestion.’

‘In any case you will perhaps not object to answer one or two questions,’ said the Lord Chancellor. ‘Your answer may be very helpful.’

Vespucci bowed in assent.

‘A little time ago,’ continued the Lord Chancellor, ‘the late Prime Minister lost a number of valuable cattle one night—they died precisely as the unfortunate young men died at the Hotel Petronia. In the yard close by a curious ring was found. A few days later Mr Chenery there, in travelling from Southampton to Waterloo encountered a young man who wore a ring exactly like that which I have mentioned. He afterwards met this young man at your house and questioned him about the ring. The young man, Rederdale, said that he had given it to you. Can you tell us anything about this?’

‘Of the ring in connection with the cattle, and of the cattle themselves I know nothing,’ said Vespucci. ‘Of the other ring, I think I know much. But where is that ring which was found?’

Marillier stepped forward and handed a small case to the Home Secretary.

‘The ring is inside, sir,’ he said in a low voice.

Vespucci also drew a ring case from his pocket.

‘And here,’ he said, ‘is the ring I received from Rederdale, which he found in Paris. Compare them, gentlemen, if you wish, but please not to confuse them. There is a history attached to mine—and there may be to the other.’

Everybody gathered round to see the rings. That they were replicas of each other was evident. It was impossible to discover the slightest difference between them. The Home Secretary finally handed them back to their respective owners. He looked at Vespucci invitingly.

‘I think you have some statement to make, signor,’ he said.

Vespucci, who seemed to have become very thoughtful since the appearance of the ring found at Somerbourne, nodded.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. Perhaps I may be allowed to say what I have to say in my own way. I confess that I am astonished to hear of the existence of the ring which you have shown me—still more astonished to see it. There is some mystery here which I cannot yet guess at—we may be able to fathom it.’

He paused for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts with regard to what he was about to say; the others, who felt that this singular man was something out of the common, watched him curiously. When he spoke again his eyes looked as if he was regarding far-off things.

‘I shall have to go back to other days, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘I shall have to speak of matters half-forgotten: of men who are dead. You must know that I am a native of Bologna, in which city I was born forty-nine years ago. My father was a man of great wealth and position there—our family was well known then and will be remembered now, though I personally have never visited Bologna for many years. I had but one brother—Marco, who is now dead. He was three years younger than I.’

This Marco, thought Jocelyn Chenery, must, then, have been the father of Pepita. He listened eagerly to every word that came from Vespucci’s lips.

‘When I was twenty-four years of age, and Marco twenty-one, our father died,’ continued the Italian. ‘As our mother was already dead, and we were the only children of the marriage, we inherited our father’s great fortune. Marco desired to travel, and for a few years I did not see him. I remained for the most part in Italy, settling in Rome. I never married—I devoted myself, as I do now, to experimental science, the taste was hereditary—my father was celebrated as being one of the greatest chemists of his day.

‘At the end of some years Marco, who had travelled in every part of the world, wrote to me that he had settled down in Paris, and begged me to visit him. I lost little time in doing so. On reaching Paris I found that he had established himself in a comfortable château a few miles outside the city, and was about to be married to a young Spanish lady whom he had met in New York. I remained with Marco until after the marriage, and had the satisfaction of seeing him happily settled, with all that man could wish for, and a charming wife whom he adored.

‘I soon discovered that Marco had, like myself, developed the taste for experimental science, which we had inherited from our father. He had visited all the great savants of the world; the most famous schools; he was a member of many learned societies, though he was not interested in the things which more particularly interested me—his line of research was not mine. During the time that I spent with him, both before and after his marriage, he was alone every day in his laboratory for hours, and nothing was allowed to interrupt him. I concluded that he was conducting some great experiment and said nothing. But one day, not very long before I left Paris, he spoke.

‘“Brother Pietro,” he said, “although of late years we have not seen anything of each other, we are true brothers and faithful friends, and I am mind-

ed to open my heart to you, and to you only of all persons in the world, not even excepting my adored wife."

'I stared at Marco, gentlemen, for I recognised that this was some very serious thing of which he was speaking. He was the sort of husband who shared everything with his wife—what could this be which he would not share with her?

'"Anything that you tell me, Marco," I said, "I shall regard as sacred."

'He bowed his head at that as if there was no necessity of my offering him an assurance.

'"You may have observed, Pietro," he said, "that I work alone in my laboratory."

'I signified my assent and waited to hear more.

'"For some years," he continued, "I have been experimenting in poisons. I am not a boaster, brother, but I do not suppose that there has ever been any man, or is any man, who knows as much about poison as I do. My object has been to discover the most powerful poison ever known—a poison which will have instantaneous effect, destroy life with the speed of lightning, and leave absolutely no trace."

'I stared at my brother in amazement.

'Well?' I said at last.

'"Brother," he replied, "I have discovered it!"'

3

The Italian paused in his story and looked round the ring of faces which surrounded him. He noted the different shades of expression in each, but saw that every man there was thoroughly engrossed. And presently he went on with the narrative.

'You may be sure, gentlemen, that I, as an experimentalist myself, was interested in my brother's announcement,' he said. 'But suddenly I grasped the awful, the sinister meaning of his words in their terrible significance, in the full recognition of what they implied in naked truth. The power to inflict instantaneous death by means impossible of detection by human skill or knowledge—why, that was to be as a God! I gazed at Marco with awe, and no doubt my horror was expressed in my face. Marco bowed his head, as if he divined my thoughts.

'"It is a terrible power to be master of, Pietro," he said, "but I possess it."

'I was almost too amazed, too overwhelmed to reply to him. At last I got some words out.

'"Marco!" I exclaimed. "Do you know what you are saying? A man possessed of this power might dictate terms to the world. He might make war upon Society, upon the whole human race!"

'"You speak truth," said he. "That has been my conception from the time I began my experiments. A man in possession of the secret which I am master of, Pietro, could slay as no army could ever slay, and not all the ingenuity of which the human brain is capable could ever detect him."

'I was almost faint with horror at the idea of this unearthly power. The knowledge that my brother had discovered such a secret seemed to tear him from me, to place worlds between us. I may have unconsciously shrunk from him; when he spoke again it was in a reassuring voice.

‘“Do not fear, brother,” he said. “I shall never make this power known. It will remain a secret so far as I am concerned. Yet there are Governments that would give millions upon millions to be in possession of it. Fortunately, our father left us rich men.”

‘“It would perhaps have been better if you had not made this discovery, Marco,” I said. “The knowledge of it can never leave you.”

‘“It was, eventually, by an accident that I made it,” he answered. “It is a simple matter, Pietro, like all great things. In fine, it is merely that I have discovered an unheard-of force which can be controlled by man. I call it a poison, for it is generated after a distinct formula, the terms of which will be my secret to the day of my death. No, brother Pietro, have no fear. I believe this to be the greatest discovery ever made by a scientist, but the world shall never be harmed by it. After all, it is out of the domain of man—it is of the nature of the lightning of Heaven. Pietro, would you like to see a manifestation of it?”

‘I shrank from him in horror. I was so agitated that I could only think of human beings. He read my thoughts and hastened to reassure me.

‘“Not on man, Pietro!” he said. “No—this power shall never be used on man. But there is a horse, once used in the gardens, which is suffering from an incurable disease and must be destroyed, and this morning I told the head-gardener that I would attend to the matter. It shall die—instantaneously and painlessly—by the agency I have discovered; afterwards I will discharge a bullet into its brain, and the men will think it died by that means. Come!”

‘My curiosity as a scientist, gentlemen, was keenly affected by this offer, and I consented to accompany my brother, who, having fetched a heavy army revolver from his study, led me out to the grounds. The horse which was to die was in a small paddock, far away from the house and the gardens; Marco had purposely had it placed there so that none of the men on his estate should witness our proceedings. In spite of its incurable disease the animal was feeding with apparent appetite; I, in fact, could not see any trace of illness about it. As we approached the railings of the paddock it lifted its head, stared at us and continued to regard us.

‘“Pietro,” said my brother, “you will observe that we are at some fifteen yards’ distance from this animal which is about to die as easily and painlessly as a child goes to sleep on its mother’s breast. Behold it well—for

you will see nothing to account for its death. Are you watching and ready to see it die?"

'Gentlemen, I was throbbing, tingling, pulsing with as much agitation as if I were about to witness the execution of a fellow-creature, but I made a great effort and controlled myself, though I was trembling in every limb.

'"I am watching and ready," I replied.

'"Then—now!" said my brother.

'Raising his right hand he held it, the fingers slightly doubled, towards the horse, who was still regarding us steadily. Gentlemen, I swear to you that I saw nothing except that the animal's nostrils dilated, and it drew in its breath with one quick gasp, and that it collapsed to the earth, stone dead! I could have shrieked from terror; as it was, I was obliged to cling to the railings. For this manifestation of the power of death was horrible.

'"Courage, Pietro!" said my brother. "That is the last time I shall ever use this power. I have previously destroyed animals with it, but it shall never be used to destroy human life. Yet—you have witnessed its power."

'I went over and examined the dead horse. There was not a mark upon it; there was no odour of poison or drug about its nostrils—the life had just been extinguished from it as one might extinguish the electric lamp by a mere instantaneous pressure of a finger tip! I walked away from it, filled with horror at the thought that any human being could discover such a power.

'Marco presently joined me. I was still greatly agitated. I took his hand.

'"Marco my brother!" I said with all the fervour of which I was capable, "I implore you, by the memory of our parents, to promise me that this awful power shall never be used upon our fellow-beings! I do not know what it is—I can only see the result. But it is not for any man to use upon his brother men."

'Marco pressed my hand.

'"Rest assured, brother," he replied. "I am content to have discovered this force. The formula from which it is generated shall never be revealed to any man by me. Yet I could have conquered the world with it. The armies of Germany, the navy of England in all their strength are as nothing to this, Pietro!"

'Gentlemen, that subject was never again mentioned between my brother and myself. Shortly after this incident I left him and returned to Italy. During the subsequent years he visited me; I visited him. Eventually I came

to London and settled in my present residence. Then Marco and the wife whom he adored met with a sad fate; they were victims of a railway accident and died together. As I have declared, gentlemen, the subject of Marco's discovery was never again mentioned between us; I had always believed that the secret died with him. But since reading in the newspapers of this morning the appalling news of the occurrence at the Hotel Petronia, since hearing of the death of the late Premier's cattle, I do not believe that it died with him—rather, I am sure, I am convinced, that some person has become possessed of that secret and that he or they are the authors of these crimes!'

Signor Vespucci concluded his story with emphatic gestures; there was not a man in the room who was not convinced that he was telling the truth. For a while there was silence; then one of the medical men present, after a whispered consultation with his colleagues and the Home Secretary, turned to him.

'May I ask you, Signor Vespucci, as a scientist yourself, if you ever formed any idea as to what the poison, or force, or whatever it was that your brother used, may have been?' he asked.

The Italian bent his head.

'Yes,' he replied. 'In bygone years I frequently speculated upon the matter, and since I read the newspapers this morning I have thought about it again. I believe that force to have been nothing more nor less than some previously unknown substance which, inhaled by the victim in the form of unseen and undiscernible ether, would instantly destroy life at its very source by literal annihilation of the vital principle. In the case of the horse I am sure that the instant its nostrils dilated as this ether-like substance passed (as it undoubtedly did pass) from my brother to itself, it died. It would never breathe again; its heart would instantly cease to beat; in a word, it would, in an infinitesimal fraction of a second, be no longer a living thing, but so much inanimate matter. The same instantaneous process must have occurred in the case of the cattle at Somerbourne, and in that of the young men at the Hotel Petronia.'

'You cannot conceive your brother capable of having revealed this secret to anyone, Signor Vespucci?' asked the Home Secretary.

Vespucci shook his head with decision.

'My brother gave me his word,' he said solemnly. 'He would not break his word given to me. But I can conceive that he may have written down the

formula of this new force, and that the memorandum may have been stolen. Many people had ready access to his laboratory and he had many assistants. Also, he died suddenly, and his belongings might have been overhauled before I, his executor, gained access to them. Personally, I am inclined to the opinion that one or other of his assistants must have come into possession of this fateful secret and is now exploiting it. For I firmly believe, gentlemen, that that secret is at the root of these mysteries.'

Another silence followed; no one seemed inclined to ask Signor Vespucci any further questions. But suddenly the great financial magnate, who had listened with the closest attention to all that the Italian had said, turned to him quickly, as if an idea had struck him.

'I believe you said that you were sure that you had previously known the ring which you received from Rederdale?' he said. 'May I ask where you had seen it?'

'Ah, I was going to mention that,' replied Vespucci. 'Yes—I had seen it on my brother's finger. He wore it all the time I was in Paris at the period I have told you of. I am sure it is the same ring, and I conclude that at his death it was probably stolen and found its way into the curio-shop where Rederdale discovered it.'

'How do you account for the second ring, exactly like it?' asked the Home Secretary.

Vespucci shook his head. The financial Napoleon shook his, too, and rose from his chair.

'It's just as I said at first,' he remarked testily. 'This is a conspiracy. These men have the whip hand and that ransom will have to be paid. That's certain!'

4

The financial magnate, who seemed to be thoroughly convinced that he had said the last word on this great question, drew on his gloves with nice precision, and was taking up his hat with the evident intention of leaving the room when the Lord Chancellor, turning to him with something very like an ironical smile, arrested his progress.

'I should like to make some slight comment on what you have just said,' he remarked dryly. 'You say that the only thing we can do is to pay the sum these men, or whoever they are, demand. Very well—now supposing we pay that sum, how do we know that they, possessing the power they do, may not make further demands upon us, or, if not upon us, upon some other nation, or nations? It appears to me that if their power is as stupendous as it seems, the whole world is entirely at their mercy.'

There was silence for a moment. Every man looked at his neighbour. The great financier glared at the Lord Chancellor.

'Well?' he said fiercely. 'Well? I don't know what your lordship is driving at.'

'Simply at this—why should ten millions satisfy these people?' replied the Lord Chancellor. 'There is an old adage to the effect that much wants more. I think they will want more—eventually.'

Nobody seemed to have any remark to make upon that, and the great legal luminary went on.

'If a man has you in a very tight place with a pistol to your head he can extract every penny from your pockets,' he said. 'He can say, "Give me your purse and I will let you go," but as soon as he has got the purse he can say, "I will have your watch and chain as well." When he has got watch and chain he can say, "On third consideration I will have everything you have—I will not even leave your shirt."'

The financier impatiently tapped the floor with his gold-mounted umbrella.

'Well—well—well?' he said.

'That is all,' answered the Lord Chancellor, quietly.

'We've got to pay, I tell you,' said the financier. 'We've got to pay!'

One of the high personages present, a shy-looking gentleman who had not previously spoken, uttered a timid contribution to the discussion.

'May I be permitted to make a suggestion?' he said. 'It seems to me that the most advisable thing to do would be to bargain with these people. If, by some means of which we know nothing, they have come into possession of the terrible secret discovered by Signor Marco Vespucci, could we not buy it from them, so that it will never again be a menace, a danger to the world?'

'How,' asked the Lord Chancellor with one of his dry smiles, 'how, sir, are you going to rely upon their honour? There is nothing to prevent them from breaking their word as soon as your bargain is completed, and using their knowledge again here, or in Russia, or Germany, or the United States, or anywhere.'

Once more every man looked at his neighbour and shook his head.

'We seem to be at a deadlock,' said the Home Secretary at last. 'I think the best thing we can do is to await the reply of these mysterious people to the communication we have just sent out through the newspapers. Indeed, at present, that is all we can do.'

Then the informal conference broke up, and every man went his way ill at ease, baffled and wondering. The more discerning and thoughtful knew that there would have been less danger to the nation in the presence of an invading army than in that of this secret enemy, able to strike the most deadly of blows and yet remain secure in its obscurity.

If the authorities could have had their way no news and no information would have leaked out or been given. But in these days, when there is so little privacy and so many people exist whose sole object in life is to supply the papers with news, and to worm and ferret out all that can be extracted, it is impossible to keep the public long in ignorance, and London was soon humming with rumour. An affair like that of the Hotel Petronia cannot be hushed up; too many great and wealthy families were directly concerned in it to permit of its being left alone as a topic of excited discussion in Society; the horror of it afforded an excellent subject of comment and speculation

amongst the middle and lower classes. Crowds of people flocked day after day to gaze, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, upon the stately façade of the Hotel Petronia, whose proprietors, had they deemed it seemly, could have quickly made a small fortune by exhibiting the room, in which the fatal banquet took place, at even a shilling a head. Amongst these crowds and in clubs, taverns, groups of idlers in the parks and in all places where men congregate, nothing else but this horror was talked of, and the newspapers, especially of the more sensational order, moved heaven and earth to get hold of news. It was not long before a general impression spread over the entire area of the Metropolis that London was at the mercy of an unscrupulous gang of miscreants who were so clever, so adept at destruction that they might well be gifted with super-natural powers. They had struck this one blow as a preliminary; soon they would strike others. The whole city, perhaps the nation, was as a lamb whose throat the butcher can cut whenever it pleases him so to do.

Individual fear is a terrible thing, but it is as nothing compared to the fear which can seize upon a multitude as upon one man. The fear in this instance was a quiet fear, and was accordingly far more intense than the fear which manifests itself in wild, ungovernable panic. Nobody knew where or when or upon whom the next blow might fall. Presumably it would be much more sweeping and drastic in its effects than the first blow. The destroyers would, in all probability, go in for a wholesale slaughter. Accordingly, people kept away from places of public resort. Only the most devout went to church; the theatres, music-halls and concert-rooms were practically deserted; in the most crowded parts of the city men went about wondering if destruction was suddenly coming amongst them; all who could do so kept to their own houses or left town.

Naturally, the instinct of seeking after protection sent troops of people to the Home Office, to beg the authorities to do something and to do it quickly. These informal deputations were of all ranks and classes; the great and the rich demanded protection; the humble and the poor demanded protection. The folk who lived in Belgravia and Mayfair wanted to know what was going to happen; the tradesman of the Strand and his brother of Oxford Street were equally anxious on the same score. Things, in fact, were coming to a crisis and a stand-still. Nobody would go anywhere. A levee, a Court and a great public function had to be indefinitely postponed; a new man-of-war was launched down the Thames in the presence of only the workmen who

had been engaged on it; scarcely anybody went to Ascot. And yet the days passed and nothing happened. A week had gone since the affair of the Hotel Petronia; poor Mr Pontifex had been buried in the little churchyard that was nearest to Somerbourne Manor; Lord Caltonbury, until then Foreign Secretary, had become First Lord of the Treasury and Prime Minister in his place—but nothing had happened. The announcement which the Home Secretary had published in all the papers, and was to all intents and purposes a plain hint that the ransom demanded from Mr Pontifex would now be paid, had so far been disregarded, and everybody was aching with surprise and suspense.

Nobody in all London had been so much amazed by these startling events as Detective-Inspector Marillier, to whose lot it had never fallen to be mixed up in such a case. Marillier was in his way a remarkable man and character. By nature he was just the sort of person to be surprised at a great many things, for he had a very limited intelligence and next to no imagination. But he had the instincts of a sleuth-hound, and if his nose were once put upon a trail which afforded strong scent, he could follow up all the time and never tire. Originally a country policeman, he had joined the Metropolitan force and by sheer dogged persistency had attained his present rank, to which, however, he had been largely helped by the late Prime Minister's recommendation of him after he had recovered that eminent person's stolen property. Marillier had since then achieved similar successes, but they had all been with evil-doers who could be seized in actual flesh and blood; what troubled him in the matter of Somerbourne Manor and the Hotel Petronia was that he was asked to discover apparently superhuman miscreants who were as impalpable as a mirage or the reflection of a rainbow.

Marillier was returning along the Strand from a visit to the Hotel Petronia (he often went there and hunted round and about the suite of rooms which Paul J. Milman had taken for that fateful entertainment) one morning about a week after the conference at the Home Office, when he felt a light tap on his arm, and turning, found himself confronted by a gentleman who was a stranger to him. He looked an inquiry.

'You will pardon me,' said the stranger. 'I believe I address Detective-Inspector Marillier?'

'That's my name, sir,' replied Marillier, stolidly.

‘I should like to have a little conversation with you,’ said the stranger. He looked round about him. ‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘Shall we step over to the courtyard of the Cecil?’

Marillier, naturally suspicious, looked the man over. He was a tall, handsome, full-bearded man, irreproachably dressed, having the manners and tone of a person of fashion and distinction; although he spoke excellent English Marillier formed an impression that he was a foreigner, though of what nationality he could not think. He hesitated, wondering what the man wanted with him.

‘Well, sir,’ he said at last, ‘of course, if it’s anything important—’

‘It is highly important,’ answered the stranger. ‘Also, it will be personally beneficial to you to listen to me.’

Marillier was not above taking the hint. He made a show of looking at his watch.

‘Well, five minutes then, sir,’ he said.

The stranger threaded his way across the crowded Strand, and entering the courtyard of the Cecil led Marillier to a quiet corner. It being a very hot morning he ordered cooling drinks of an unusually pleasant nature for himself and his companion, and offered the detective a choice cigar. Marillier, who was not averse to creature comforts, accepted these luxuries with a good conscience and settled himself in his chair to hear what this person had to say to him.

‘I am aware,’ said the stranger, when the waiter had accepted a liberal tip and departed, ‘that you are much concerned in what we will call the affair Hotel Petronia. I have learnt that from various sources, and also from the newspapers. And I understand,’ he continued, as Marillier nodded slightly, ‘that in your keeping is the mysterious ring which has been mentioned.’

‘It might be, and again it mightn’t be,’ replied Marillier, half surlily, half suspiciously.

‘We will take it that it is,’ said the stranger, imperturbably. He bent forward and tapped the detective’s arm. ‘My friend,’ he whispered, ‘I desire to possess that ring!’

5

Marillier had not only cultivated the habit of being suspicious of everything and everybody as being one proper to his profession, but had inherited a suspicious nature from either his father or his mother, and possibly from both, and he turned an eye on the stranger which was full of meaning. He also made as if he would rise.

'If you think you can tamper with me,' he began slowly, 'you're on the wrong tack, and—'

But the stranger who appeared to be very self-confident and was certainly self-assured, waved him to his seat again.

'My dear sir,' he said, 'be seated and don't talk nonsense. I want to talk to you. And as I never ask anybody to give me anything for nothing, no, not even ten minutes' conversation, I'll pay you in advance for your time and trouble.'

He drew out a pocketbook from a pocket constructed within his waistcoat and opened it carelessly. Marillier's sharply-observant eyes saw that it was stuffed with notes—Bank of England notes, new and crisp, delightful to contemplate. The stranger drew out the first he fingered, glanced in an indifferent fashion at the amount denominated on its virgin surface and passed it over to the detective.

'There, put that in your pocket,' he said. 'That'll recompense you for ten minutes' time given to me. It's more than you'd earn at Scotland Yard in a week, I'll be bound.'

Marillier knew that it was more than he would earn at Scotland Yard in four weeks, for the note at which he found himself looking was for fifty pounds, but, suspicious as ever, he merely grunted and gazed at the gift doubtfully.

‘It may be a flash ’un for anything I know,’ he said ungraciously. ‘I’m not an expert.’

The stranger raised a much-beringed hand and summoned the nearest waiter. He picked up the note and handed it over.

‘Take that to the cashier’s office and bring me back five ten-pound notes in exchange,’ he said. He turned to Marillier when the man had gone. ‘I suppose it’s your business to be suspicious, my friend,’ he observed with a grim smile.

‘I don’t know with whom I’m dealing,’ said Marillier. ‘One can’t be too careful.’

‘Well, I don’t know that I’m going to enlighten you,’ said the stranger. ‘You can think of me as the Millionaire from Nowhere. I happen to be a millionaire, a multi-millionaire, a multi-multi-millionaire. I also happen to have an insatiable love of collecting curiosities of all sorts and at all prices, always providing they really are curiosities. That, my friend, is why I desire to possess that ring I spoke of just now.’

Marillier nodded. He was beginning to understand and to comprehend. He had heard of Mr Pierpont Morgan; once, indeed, he had been employed in mounting guard over a picture which that gentleman had purchased. This man of the many banknotes was presumably of the same class. Marillier had a great respect for money.

Although he was not of an imaginative temperament he had a day-dream which he cherished. His long experience of London life had not made him a Londoner. Always he thought of the countryside in which he was born and bred; it had long been his ambition to go back there and to live in a modest sort of way the life of a retired gentleman. He wanted to buy a house, with a bit of land, a garden, an orchard; he wanted to keep a smartish trap and a good horse; he wanted to be able to stroll around amongst his fowls, his cattle, his sheep, and to feel that he was the possessor of flocks and herds and a dog or two. To this end he had saved all he could, and he was looking forward to retiring on his pension and his savings when another year was over. Meanwhile, stray gifts like fifty pounds did not come amiss. He kept an eye open for the return of the waiter who had gone to change the note.

‘There,’ said the Millionaire from Nowhere, pushing five ten-pound notes over to Marillier when the waiter returned. ‘You’ll find these good enough. I’ll warrant. You don’t take in hotel cashiers here. And now we’ll talk. You’ll remember I’ve bought your time—I’m not bribing you.’

Marillier carefully put away the notes.

'If you put it that way,' he said. 'Of course I—'

'I do put it that way,' said the stranger. 'There's no other way to put it—I buy all I want, I don't beg it. Now I want to buy that ring from you. It's in your possession. How much will you hand it over for?'

Marillier felt a spirit of greed swell within him. Something told him that he had the chance of a lifetime at his disposal.

'It isn't mine to dispose of,' he muttered hoarsely.

The stranger laughed.

'Chut!' he said. 'Possession's nine-tenths of the law. You've got it—I mean to have it. If I take a real fancy to have a thing I'm bound to get it in the end. I've bought relics out of churches. I've bought pictures that I know were stolen and I keep 'em where nobody but myself can ever see them. Well, why not? I've so many millions that I can do as I like. I want that ring.'

Marillier looked furtively around him. There was not a soul within earshot; that corner of the courtyard was very quiet.

'Suppose it were found out?' he said.

'It would be your fault if it ever was found out,' said the stranger. 'You can say you've lost it—no, a much better idea is to have it stolen from you. Ha—ha!—that's a good notion. You make an appointment with me and you place the ring in your waistcoat pocket, from which I abstract it. Then I hand you whatever we agree upon—that is, of course, if the ring is the ring, the veritable, genuine article. Eh?'

Marillier regarded the ash of his cigar carefully for a full minute.

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I don't think it can be done. It's impossible.'

'There's no such word in my dictionary,' said the stranger. 'Listen to me, my friend. I should say that you are on the verge of the age at which you officers retire, judging by your looks.'

'Well?' said Marillier.

'Then you'll get a pension. Now,' continued the man of money, 'will that pension wholly suffice for the nice, easy, comfortable life you'd like to lead? Will it, even when you've added to it your little bit of savings? Eh?'

'We could all do with a bit more,' said the detective.

'Ay, of course—that's the most sensible remark I've heard you make,' said the stranger. 'Now let me hear you give a sensible reply to an offer I'm

going to put before you. You hand me that ring, or let me take it from you, and I'll hand you five thousand pounds.'

Five thousand pounds! The detective felt his heart bound within him. Five thousand pounds for a mere gold ring, heavy and massive certainly, and with a queer device on it, but after all, not worth more than a few pounds in intrinsic value. He stared at the stranger as if he were something odd, striving all the time not to show any emotion. And suddenly his eyes became sly and cunning.

'No—no!' he said. 'I see you know its value. I should want much more than that. There's—there's the tremendous risk to me, let alone the value of the ring.'

The stranger laughed sneeringly. 'My dear man!' he exclaimed. 'The ring would be valued by any goldsmith at perhaps six to eight pounds as mere gold, if as much. There's no value in it, except as a curio, I want it as a curio. I once gave a thousand pounds for a carving-knife originally sold for seven-and-sixpence, merely because a notorious criminal—a Frenchman—had systematically cut throats with it.'

Marillier hesitated. 'Make it six thousand,' he said.

'My friend,' said the stranger, 'I very much dislike bargaining. On the understanding that you ask no further advance I will say six thousand pounds—your own price. It is a very handsome price—six thousand pounds, judiciously invested, should bring you in an annual income of at least three hundred pounds. Now, when do you propose to hand that ring over?'

Marillier was now angry with himself for not having stood out for more money. The stranger had so readily increased the five thousand to six that Marillier began to think that he might have got at least twice the original amount he had asked for.

'How will you pay me?' he asked surlily. 'I don't want any cheques. It'll have to be cash.'

'Cash of course, my dear sir,' replied the stranger. 'Six thousand in sovereigns, however, would be rather heavy—Bank of England notes, eh?'

'So long as they're genuine,' said the suspicious Marillier.

The stranger made a reproving face at this, and the detective hastened to add that one was obliged to be careful. Then they arranged that Marillier was to fetch the ring while the Millionaire from Nowhere went to his bank and drew the necessary money.

‘In about an hour from now,’ said the stranger, ‘you will come back here and ask for Mr Morton. That is not my name, but it is the name by which I am known at this hotel. They will show you to my private sitting room and there we will finish our business. If I am a few moments late, wait for me.’

Marillier went away to Scotland Yard and took the ring from the safe in which he had kept it locked up. Six thousand pounds for a hoop of gold with a setting which was certainly not of the order of precious stones! Well—he could find plenty of excuses for having lost it, and the stranger was evidently the sort of man who would be content with the mere sense of possession and would not show it about, so he, Marillier, ought to be safe. Six thousand pounds for just handing it over—and for betraying his trust! The last thought brought beads of perspiration to Marillier’s forehead and made him tingle all over—but he caught a mental vision of the little place in the country with all its bucolic delights, and hastily thrusting the ring into his waistcoat pocket he went back to the Cecil. Within ten minutes of his arrival there the transaction between himself and the pseudo Mr Morton was over—the ring was in Mr Morton’s pocket, and six banknotes of a thousand pounds each were in Marillier’s purse.

‘Now, my friend,’ said the buyer of the ring, ‘as we shall not meet again I wish to give you some parting advice. Let it be known at once, or very soon, that you have lost this ring. Invent some very plausible story, it slipped through an unsuspected hole in your waistcoat pocket, eh? It was purely accidental—you will not be punished. After that, keep your mouth closed as regards any transaction between you and myself. It will be best—for you. I think you understand?’

Marillier, who had watched the stranger closely, slowly nodded his head, and his right eye almost winked.

‘I shall be as silent as—as a dead man,’ he answered.

‘Then—good morning,’ said the stranger.

Marillier went out. He had broken his trust for the first time in all his experience. But the six banknotes lay warm against his heart.

6

Of all the members of the British Cabinet for the time being, the Home Secretary deserves most sympathy from his fellow-beings. No other man whose days are spent in the wildernesses of Whitehall and nights in the Sahara of St Stephen's has such reason to grow bald, to become dyspeptic and to escape to the golf-links or turn to drink. If William Sykes is to be hanged by the neck till he is' dead because he battered his wife's skull into small pieces with the coal-hammer, the Home Secretary is regarded by quite a large number of people as a monster of inhumanity if he does not show mercy unto that unfortunate. If tyrannical, un-paid magistrates send Thomas Buggins to gaol for poaching a hare, the Home Secretary is shrieked at by members with long hair and nondescript garments. If ladies who desire to vote are denied that doubtful privilege, the Home Secretary is chastised by their followers, or has his young family kidnapped from his own doorstep. If a long-suffering policeman draws his truncheon upon a gentleman who has bit off his ear, blackened his eye and kicked him violently in the region of the stomach, the Home Secretary is called a brute, and grave reflections are cast upon his parentage. It is accordingly, no wonder, that all Home Secretaries lose their hair, find a sharp tongue, and develop a line in centre of their foreheads.

The garment of tribulation which had weighed heavy on the late Mr Pontifex had descended with additional weight on the Home Secretary. The attention of everybody in the country, and of a good many people abroad, seemed to be concentrated upon him. The Home Office became transformed into a replica of St Martin's-le-Grand. All manner of people, and especially retired officers and country clergymen, made suggestions as to what ought to be done; those people who had no suggestions to make filled countless reams of paper of all degrees of size and quality in abusing

the Home Secretary, the permanent officials and the entire body of London police. Consequential persons of the male persuasion, and ancient females who had money in the Funds, wrote long letters, which intimated that they would pay no more Income Tax until they were assured that they might sleep in their beds in peace. A well-known gentleman, famous for his benevolent appearance and for his advocacy of the Boers at the time of the almost-forgotten South African War, declared that there was nothing to do but to massacre every alien in the country, and while offering to provide twenty guillotines free of expense, resigned his membership of the Peace Society. To all these suggestions the Home Secretary was supposed to listen carefully—what else was he paid his five thousand pounds a year for? As a matter of fact the unfortunate gentleman listened to none of them, any more than he listened to the crowds who gathered outside the Home Office and even followed him home to his wife and babes in Prince's Gardens, under the impression that unless he did something of a mysterious nature the fate of the Milman party at the Hotel Petronia would be the fate of the denizens of Highbury New Park, Mile End Road, Golder's Green and South Kensington.

No response came to the announcement in the newspapers. A week—-ten days—-a fortnight passed; the Home Secretary received no intimation as to what was to be done. Nothing happened at all, and there were indications that London, with its wonted lightheartedness, its full appreciation of all the mystery and meaning of a nine-days' wonder, was thinking of settling down again. The correspondence which had become such a nuisance to the staff at the Home Office began to dwindle; the crowds which had annoyed the Home Secretary grew smaller. Nevertheless, the men who had gathered together in that informal conference did not share in the renewal of confidence; they were all on the tenterhooks of anticipation.

And then, quite suddenly, if not unexpectedly, the reply of the mysterious conspirators came. It came, as all their communications to Mr Pontifex had come, in a queer fashion. Stepping into his motor-brougham one morning on his way from his house to his office, the Home Secretary was handed a sealed envelope by his chauffeur.

'Beg pardon, sir,' said the man. 'A person just now pushed this into my hand and told me to give it to you the instant you came out.'

The Home Secretary, who saw that his name and address were typed and that the envelope was heavily sealed, took the missive with

evident annoyance.

'Don't take anything like this again, Parker,' he said. 'The butler or whoever is at the door is the proper person to receive this sort of thing.'

'Very sorry, sir,' said Parker. 'The note was in my hand and the person off and round the corner before I'd time to speak, sir.'

'What sort of person was he?' asked the Home Secretary.

'It was a she, sir-—a young woman, as far as I could make out,' answered Parker. 'I didn't see her face, sir—-she'd a very thick veil and she was that quick I only saw her back as she vanished round the corner.'

The Home Secretary got into his motor-brougham holding the missive. There were several documents in the brougham already, at which he had intended to glance on his way to Whitehall, but out of sheer curiosity he cut open the flap of the envelope in his hand and drew out the contents. And then he suddenly recognised, with a start, that he had been presented with the reply of the conspirators to his announcement of more than a fortnight before. He ran it over with eager eyes, then read it slowly, carefully and thoughtfully.

If the deceased Prime Minister had been astonished at the cleverness and subtlety of the directions given by the conspirators for the paying over of the ten million pounds sterling of ransom, the Home Secretary was amazed. He had cherished a hope that by this means the miscreants might be traced and detected, but he saw at once that the directions they had sent him were of such nature that that hope was as nothing. He had never heard of such ingenuity, and though he was a long way removed from being the financial genius that Mr Pontifex had been, he knew enough to know that the brain or brains he was dealing with were much cleverer than his own. And he recognised that unless the ransom was paid these mole-like enemies of Society would cause another terrible upheaval. The financial magnate had been right—they would have to pay.

The thought of the financial magnate made the Home Secretary telephone to that great man as soon as he arrived in his own room, requesting the favour of his immediate presence. He also secured the presence of the new Premier, Lord Caltonbury, and of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and when all these personages were gathered in conclave with the great financier he laid the communication which he had just received before them and asked their careful consideration of it. The Napoleon of finance burst into loud and enthusiastic praise.

Whoever was at the back of this infernal conspiracy, he said, was a heaven-born genius! No more cunning plan than that devised for the paying over of the ransom, in such a way that the payers would never and could never know who the payees were, could have been devised, invented, imagined in Throgmorton Street, Threadneedle Street or Capel Court. It was masterly, it was grand, it revealed financial genius of the highest order.

'If I knew the man who devised that scheme,' he exclaimed, 'I would-—yes, I would offer him a partnership!' Then, remembering that he had something to remind the others of, he said, with a cynical smile, 'You will remember, gentlemen, that I said these fellows would have to be paid.'

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, who, as a man obliged for his sins to deal daily with figures, and to invent all manner of ingenuities for the extracting of money out of unwilling pockets, had also formed a great opinion of the ingenuity of the common enemy, could not forbear giving the professional financier a dig in his ribs.

'Yes,' he said, with one of the sweetly cynical smiles for which he was famous, 'you told us that about one-and-twenty times. But you did not tell us who was going to find the money to pay them.'

The man who dealt and thought in millions looked up quickly and shot a suspicious glance at the speaker.

'Who?' he exclaimed. 'Who? Why, the Government, of course! Who else?'

The Chancellor gave one of his well-known coughs. Private members who had little harmless fads which only required a modicum of financial assistance from the Treasury knew those coughs very well. They meant much.

'It will be all I can do to make ends meet this year,' he said. 'And I had only a surplus of two millions last year,' he added, with a touch of regret in his fine voice.

The great man gasped. He grew red of countenance.

'But of course you must find it!' he exclaimed. 'If -—if the money is not found these fellows might—-why, they might turn their attention to the City!'

'Then the City should prevent accidents by anticipation,' said the Chancellor.

Lord Caltonbury cleared his throat.

'There is no precedent,' he said, speaking in his most measured tones, 'no precedent whatever—so far as I am aware—for such a procedure. The

House of Commons would probably require very weighty reasons, explanations, proofs before voting money to the amount demanded.'

The financial magnate glared and brought his hand down on the table at which he was sitting with some force.

'This is temporising!' he said. 'Temporising! You can't temporise, you can't parley with highwaymen and brigands who have you safely tied up. I tell you this money must be paid, and the Government must pay it. How do you know they won't destroy both Lords and Commons next if you don't?'

Nobody answered this question, and the Home Secretary looked at his watch.

'Let us be practical,' he said. 'I have a deputation in five minutes. Now—I take it that this money will have to be paid. You observe that these people expressly say that in the event of their receiving the money the war between them and ourselves is over. We shall have to trust their—honour. You also observe that we have three clear days given in which to pay the money. I propose, therefore, that the Government should at once call together the principal authorities and leading financiers in order to decide as to the payment of the ransom. Some part must necessarily come out of public funds—as to the balance, the City will doubtless be as munificent and generous as it always has been.'

Everybody present signified his assent to this proposal, and the Home Secretary immediately caused his announcement in cypher to be sent to the London *Times* so that the enemy might learn next morning that the ransom would be duly paid. Then he turned to his ordinary daily tasks and for some time forgot all else but them. But as he was leaving the Home Office for the House of Commons a communication was handed to him, which made him return to his private room and give orders that he was not to be disturbed during an interview which he was about to give in consequence of receiving it.

This communication was a sealed letter from the American Ambassador, introducing the bearer, Mr John Hadley.

Part 6

Jannaway's Night Out

The sudden, unexpected death of Mr Pontifex had thrown the machinery of Jocelyn Chenery's world completely out of gear. The new Prime Minister had his own private secretaries, paid and unpaid, and the familiar scenes of Downing Street knew Jocelyn no more at that time. He began to feel like a fish out of water. Lesbia, who had felt her father's death very keenly, had left town on a visit to paternal relations in the North; respect for his late chief's memory kept Jocelyn from entering into the more prominent doings of the fashionable world, which that season was busier and gayer than ever. He was thinking of forswearing London and of going off to Norway for some salmon-fishing, when an event happened which suddenly pulled him back to the realities of life and to a new consideration of the mystery which had recently occupied so much of his time and thought, and for the solution of which, one way or another, he was now waiting in something like apathy. He had come to feel that the whole thing was beyond his power of understanding and penetration; that its dénouement would be of some strange character he had little doubt; it seemed to him, however, that he would have no further share in it, that it had passed out of his life—a mistaken idea, as events were quickly to prove to him.

He had dined in his rooms one evening—an unusual occurrence, due to the double fact that he did not want to dine amongst a lot of people or to go to one of his clubs—and was endeavouring to interest himself in one of a batch of new books which had come in from the library that day when Jannaway entered and announced Mr John Hadley. The next moment the American stood before him.

Jocelyn was scarcely certain whether he was glad to see his visitor or not; he had some vague notions that he had meant to spend his evening in utter solitude. But he made Hadley welcome, offered him coffee and cigarettes, and in a little while decided that he really was glad to see him—he had been in danger, perhaps, of a fit of the blues; Hadley's cheerful talk, he said to himself, would do him good.

The American talked glibly on general subjects for several minutes, then with a significant glance at the door he bent towards Jocelyn and said in a low voice:

'Mr Chenery, I came here on a special errand to you—on the advice of the Home Secretary, whom I have recently left. I suppose we may converse freely?'

Jocelyn's general apathy gave way to surprise; he felt that something was coming. The Home Secretary would not talk to Hadley without a reason; nor would he send Hadley to him without a cause.

'I believe this room's supposed to be soundproof,' he said; 'but anyway my man is going out. He'll be in here for these letters in a minute or two, and after that he'll be out until eleven o'clock.'

Hadley nodded and smoked in silence until Jannaway had fetched the letters and departed. He looked at Jocelyn with a queer smile. 'I guess you're wondering what brought me here?' he said.

'I think I can guess,' answered Jocelyn. 'The mystery of the Milman affair and all the rest of it. Is some new phase opening?'

The American slowly clipped off the end of a big black cigar which he inserted in the corner of his thin-lipped mouth.

'I shall have a good deal to tell you, Mr Chenery,' he said. 'I come to you for three reasons—first, the Home Secretary advised me to come; second, you're an English gentleman; third, you've come to be mixed up in this mystery.'

Jocelyn bowed his head and sighed.

'I sincerely wish I hadn't!' he exclaimed.

'So do I,' said Hadley. 'But I guess I'm much more mixed up in it than you are, and that I've just got to go through with it to the very bitter end. And it's your Home Secretary's opinion that I ought to talk to you and reveal myself to you as I have to him. I shall have to ask you to hear a lot of confidential matter.'

'Tell me anything you like,' said Jocelyn, wondering what he was going to listen to.

'Well, then, Mr Chenery,' said Hadley, with another of his queer smiles, 'I'll tell you to begin with that my real name is not John Hadley; I am not a patent agent, though I certainly run an office in Norfolk Street down town there in that business, which office is conducted by two qualified men; and, finally, I am not a friend of the people who live at the Villa Firenza where I met you first.'

Jocelyn looked his surprise. Hadley nodded in recognition of it, and went on, puffing between sentences at his big cigar.

'No, sir!' he said. 'I am not here in Europe to make money out of patents or anything else, nor to cultivate anybody's society for the sake of society. I

am here for one purpose only, Mr Chenery, and I do not rest until that purpose is achieved.'

Jocelyn said nothing. The face of the man before him was so grim, so determined, that he felt that whatever it was that Hadley had taken in hand he would go through with. He waited, wondering what he was to hear next.

'Mr Chenery,' continued Hadley, 'I will tell you what it is that I am here for. I am here to find the murderer of my only brother!'

Jocelyn understood the intense determination in his visitor's eyes now. They were the eyes of the animal which means to track down its prey remorselessly, inevitably. He felt himself shudder.

'The murderer of your brother!' he said. 'Your only brother!'

Hadley bowed his head and his face grew softer.

'My only brother, Mr Chenery,' he said, 'was murdered in Paris twelve months ago. He was said to have died of heart failure—'

Jocelyn started in his chair. The vision of Rederdale flashed across the field of his mental vision.

Hadley nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'You're thinking of Rederdale. Was it—was it in this room?'

'No,' answered Jocelyn, hastily. 'It was in the next—the dining room. I've never used it since. And your brother—'

'They said it was heart failure,' said Hadley. 'But I know it wasn't—he was murdered. And it's my solemn opinion, before God, Mr Chenery, that the people who murdered him were the people who murdered Milman and his eighteen friends at the Hotel Petronia, killed your friend's cattle at the country house, and put an end to Rederdale in that next room!'

Jocelyn stared at his visitor in wonder.

'Good Heavens!' he said. 'Do you mean it?'

'I do mean it,' replied Hadley. 'I'm sure if it. And, thank God, I'm at last beginning to get clues to the proof of it. Mr Chenery, I'll show you something.'

He drew a small package out of his waistcoat pocket, and unfolding several wrappings of tissue paper, uncovered a glittering object which he held out to Jocelyn on the palm of his hand.

'Do you know that?' he asked.

Jocelyn almost jumped out of his chair.

'Why, it's one of the rings!' he exclaimed. Hadley laughed—a sharp, bitter laugh.

'Sure!' he said. 'It is—one of the rings, never mind which of them nor how I got hold of it. I only secured it yesterday. Looks innocent enough, doesn't it?'

'And—?' Jocelyn looked the rest of his inquiry.

Hadley laughed again; the sound was sharper and more bitter than before.

'This is harmless—now,' he said, placing the ring on the table. 'It's like one of your big guns in peace time—it isn't charged. But when it is charged then the power of your biggest gun in war time is nothing to it. That's a fact.'

Jocelyn could only stare, first at Hadley, then at the ring, then at Hadley again. The American shook his head as much as to say, 'Yes—that's so,' and opened a small wallet, which he produced from an inner pocket.

'The French, Mr Chenery,' he observed, as he searched amongst the papers with which the wallet was filled, 'are exceedingly cute and smart people on occasion, and especially in dealing with crime. We get the Bertillon system and the best detectives stories from that country, and our methods of finding out the truth about crimes are not quite so effective as theirs, in a general way of speaking. Now, when my poor brother was found—dead as they say, murdered as I say—it occurred to somebody—and it was a brilliant thought—that as he had certainly not been dead many minutes, the impression of what he last saw might be retained on the retina of the eye, and a powerful camera was at once obtained and utilised. And this, Mr Chenery, was the result.'

Jocelyn, more and more astonished by what he heard, took a photograph which Hadley handed to him and turned back the flap of India paper which acted as curtain to it.

'Good God!' he said. 'Is it possible?'

He found himself staring at the enlarged photograph of a human eye, on the retina of which was clearly outlined—what? In Heaven's name—what?

The curious device which was engraved on the shield of the harmless-looking ring lying on the table between him and Hadley!

'What do you think of that?' asked the American.

Jocelyn handed the photograph back and shook his head.

'I—I don't know,' he replied. 'It makes me feel queer—it's like looking into the eyes of a dead man to discover the truth of some secret that he's carried away with him.'

‘Why, sure, that’s just what it is!’ said Hadley. ‘If that Frenchman hadn’t been cute enough to fix that notion I’d never have had this highly-important clue. That shield with its curious device, Mr Chenery, was the last thing my brother’s eyes saw. Obviously, then, it was held close before, or not very far off, his eyes the instant before death.’

‘Yes,’ said Jocelyn, feeling the uncanniness of all this. ‘Yes.’

‘Now, Mr Chenery,’ continued Hadley, ‘just you take a careful, observant look at the shield of that ring. You’ll see that in that curious design there are three very small circular spaces, closed in with what appear to be diamonds. Now, look at the same spaces in the photograph—what do you see?’

‘The spaces in the photograph appear to be open,’ replied Jocelyn. ‘They are black—empty.’

‘Give me the ring,’ said Hadley, and slipped it on the middle finger of his right hand. ‘It’s perfectly harmless now,’ he said. ‘So you may bend over it with impunity. Now see—when the spring in the under side of this ring is pressed those little holes are opened, and from them escaped that deadly ether-like poison which is the secret of these murders. Not all have been done with these rings, Mr Chenery, but the subtle poison has been the same. It may have been this very ring which was used to kill my brother.’

‘Hadley, for God’s sake, whom do you suspect?’ cried Jocelyn. ‘Who—who?’

Hadley smiled quietly.

‘I suspect Signor Pietro Vespucci,’ he answered.

2

Jocelyn was so amazed by the American's plain and blunt declaration of his absolute belief in a probability that he himself had been almost afraid to think of, that he made no immediate answer. Hadley, watching him with the same quiet, inscrutable smile, nodded his head.

'Yes,' he repeated. 'Pietro Vespucci!'

Jocelyn pulled his wits together.

'You said you had been with the Home Secretary?' he remarked.

'Yes,' replied Hadley. 'I spent an hour or more with him before coming on to you. I had an introduction to him from our Ambassador. Each knows what I have told you.'

'I am wondering,' said Jocelyn, slowly, 'if the Home Secretary gave you any information?'

'Yes,' responded Hadley. 'Under a pledge of secrecy, except as regards to yourself, as you were one of those present, he told me of the informal conference held by some of your representative men on the morning following the affair at the Hotel Petronia.'

'Then he would tell you that Vespucci came there?' said Jocelyn.

'Sure,' answered Hadley. 'He did.'

'Do you think that if Vespucci were responsible he would have gone to the Home Office as he did?' asked Jocelyn.

Hadley laughed—laughed almost joyously.

'I think that was one of the finest pieces of bluff I ever heard of in my life!' he exclaimed. 'We're not a little proud of our powers in that way across on the other side, but I think Vespucci would beat us. From your Home Secretary's account—and he seems to have a fine memory—it must have been magnificent. Oh, Vespucci is a consummate actor!'

‘But you believe his story to be true? I mean his story about his brother, Marco Vespucci?’ said Jocelyn.

‘I know it to be true so far as it relates to all but the secret poison,’ answered Hadley. ‘Oh, yes, for I had occasion—I’ll tell you why in a minute—to study the Vespucci family history pretty well not long ago. Oh, yes, Marco Vespucci lived in a château just outside Paris, was a man of wealth, and married a Spanish girl, who with him was killed in a railway accident on the line between Paris and Rouen; Pepita is their only child and their heiress. Pepita is a very rich young woman. Yes, Pietro Vespucci’s story of his family is true. Whether, however, it was Marco or he who discovered that terrible death-agent Heaven only knows! But I have my definite belief, Mr Chenery, as to who has recently made use of it.’

Jocelyn was considering matters and weighing up facts, trying to get at a clear view of things. He was conscious of having had a suspicion of Vespucci ever since the Rederdale affair, but he knew that it was only founded on surmise. He looked at Hadley speculatively. Was the American carried away by mere surmise too?

‘I suppose you have some reason other than that you have told me of for believing Vespucci guilty?’ he asked suddenly.

Hadley’s thin lips shut tight and his face became very grim. ‘Yes!’ he said.

‘Good reason?’ asked Jocelyn.

‘Good reason—yes,’ answered Hadley. He bent across the hearthrug on which their easy chairs were placed and tapped Jocelyn on the knee. ‘Mr Chenery,’ he said, dropping his voice to a tone of great intensity, ‘when you were at Vespucci’s house, the night on which Kressler was making those experiments, did you notice a remarkable single diamond, set in platinum, which Pepita wore as a pendant?’

‘Yes—I remember it very well,’ answered Jocelyn. ‘I was struck by its fire and brilliancy, and by something—I don’t know what, for I am not an expert—which made it seem different to any diamonds I have ever seen.’

Hadley smiled. ‘I congratulate you on your sharpness of observation,’ he said. ‘And you were right. There are only three diamonds like that in the world, Mr Chenery. One is in my possession; another belongs to my sister; the third belonged to my brother. That—the third—is the one which Signorina Vespucci was wearing that night.’

Jocelyn uttered an exclamation of incredulity.

'You wouldn't swear that?' he said.

'Swear it!—I can prove it!' answered Hadley, with emphasis. 'That diamond was taken from my brother's body—of that I am as certain as I am that I see you sitting there.'

'I suppose you had seen Miss Pepita wearing it before?' asked Jocelyn.

'Yes,' replied Hadley. 'That is why I began going to the Villa Firenza. But come—shall I tell you—nay, Mr Chenery, with your permission I am here to tell you. I must tell you the whole story, for you can help me.'

Jocelyn rose and put whisky and soda on the table. But Hadley politely waved his hand.

'You might notice that night you found me with Vespucci and von Schleinitz, Mr Chenery, that I was not drinking anything,' he said. 'It wasn't because I was in Vespucci's house and watching him, but because I want to keep every nerve of me strung and every sense of me clear to find my brother's murderer! That's my aim at this period of my life.'

'I gather that you were fond of your brother,' said Jocelyn.

'Sure!—and more than fond. I just worshipped that poor boy,' answered Hadley. 'So would you if you'd known him. But I'm going to tell you. And when you've heard all, you'll not wonder that I've got to track down whoever it was that killed him. For he was killed.'

He threw away what was left of his cigar and leaning forward began to speak in a low, concentrated voice, checking off the points of his story on the tips of his long, nervous fingers, as if he had been a barrister addressing a court of law.

'My real name, Mr Chenery,' he said, 'is John Hadley Stamford. My father, William H. Stamford, made his fortune when the first rush to the California gold-fields occurred. He made a great pile there and increased it in real estate. Later in life, that sort of fever being on him again, he went off diamond-hunting in South Africa. There again he was fortunate; he was always fortunate. When he died he left me, my sister Helen, and my brother Roy about four millions each—I mean four millions each of your English pounds, not our dollars.

'Now, my sister Helen is married to Dr Elias P. Welcome, way out West. She and I were children of a first marriage; our brother Roy was the only child of a second. He was considerably younger than Helen or me—we're both over thirty years of age; Roy would have been twenty-three if he'd been living. And of course, being younger, he looked to me when our father

died—his mother was already dead—and you'll understand, Mr Chenery, that when you get a youngster sort of depending upon you it makes you fond of him.

'Well, now, it's about fifteen months ago that Roy fixed up to come over here to Europe and make an extensive acquaintance with the old countries. He came first to London and was here some weeks; then he went across to Paris. The news of his death was cabled to me in Philadelphia four days after he arrived in that city.

'Now, I must tell you that my brother, although a very steady young fellow, had a weakness which both Helen and I often told him would lead him into trouble some day if he were not more than usually careful. It was a weakness for diamonds and it was as bad in him as in any woman I ever heard of. It was largely inherited; my father, although he was such a shrewd businessman, was just the same ever after he went diamond-getting in South Africa, though not as bad as Roy. Roy carried it too far. Without seeming ostentatious he wore diamonds wherever he could. His watch chains were punctured with diamonds, his sleeve-links were gay with them; he'd enough diamond pins and rings to set up a train load of Hebrews. What was worse, he carried a wallet full of loose diamonds, all of the first water, and if he took a fancy to anybody, man or woman, he'd pick one out and have it mounted up for them as a present.

'Well, Roy went to Paris and put up at the Grand Hotel on the Boulevard des Capucines. The first day I don't know what he did; on the evening of the second he went to a masked ball; on the third about noon he was found dead in a secluded alley of the Jardin des Plantes. On the fourth they found out who he was and cabled to me. By the time I got across he was buried, and as the doctors who had made a thorough postmortem examination of him couldn't find a trace of poison or of violence, they came to the conclusion that he had died from heart failure, though they were bound to admit that that organ was healthy enough.

'However, I did not agree with that theory. Roy was found sitting on a seat behind a shrubbery—quite dead. That he had been robbed there was no doubt. Nothing was left in his pockets. He would, no doubt, be carrying a big sum in money—that I didn't regard; I thought of the wallet of diamonds, his various diamond-mounted and ornamented little vanities, and more especially of the wonderful diamond which he wore as a scarf-pin. That was one of the three which I just mentioned as being shared by my fa-

ther amongst us—he found them himself and he believed them to be unique. Roy always wore that stone—it never left him—the hotel people had noticed it. It and all the rest had gone when the body was found.

'Now, the police theory was that the spot being a very lonely one, and that the hour for déjeuner, some chance hanger-about had seen Roy's plight and had robbed him. But it wasn't mine—I was sure he'd been skilfully murdered, especially after I'd seen that photograph, and murdered probably by some acquaintance that he'd made at that masked ball. And I set to work to track that murderer. And I never got the slightest help or clue or anything until, having come over here to London for a brief rest from working the thing out in Paris, I just by accident chanced to meet Signorina Pepita wearing that diamond!

'That was in the stalls at Covent Garden—I had gone there to hear Caruso. Although the diamond had been reset as a pendant I knew it. And I forgot all about Caruso and the music, and I went out of that opera-house pretty quick and to a detective agency that I knew of. When you can command any amount of money you can do anything, and before midnight I knew that the lady who wore that diamond lived at the Villa Firenza in St John's Wood. Next day I knew her name and her relationship to the master of the house. Next week I had secured an introduction to Signor Vespucci, and I began to watch.

'I frequently saw Pepita wear that pendant, but I never spoke of it to her until my footing as an acquaintance was firmly established. Then one night, when she, Vespucci and I were dining quietly together, I complimented her on its astonishing brilliancy and asked her if it had any history. She turned languidly to Vespucci, who laughed and said that his niece had so many diamonds that she was like a man who possessed many flocks and herds and could scarcely tell one individual member from another.

'"Her mother worshipped diamonds," he added, smiling at Pepita. "Pepita takes after her."'

'Since then, Mr Chenery, I have watched and watched—and waited. These recent events have proved to me that I am on the right track. I shall put my hand on Roy's murderer!'

There was a long silence which Jocelyn at last broke.

'You are quite sure that that is the diamond?' he said.

Hadley put his hand in his pocket, drew out and opened a small case, and revealed two magnificent stones.

‘The three diamonds given to my sister, my brother and myself by my father,’ he said, ‘were all cut from one enormous stone. That stone had a curious vein or flaw, or mark in it. These are the stones belonging to Helen and to myself—there is the flaw in each. There is the corresponding mark in the stone which Pepita occasionally wears. She allowed me to handle it.’

‘You suspect then—’ said Jocelyn.

‘I suspect Vespucci of giving it to her,’ replied Hadley.

‘Look here,’ said Jocelyn, ‘Vespucci might have bought it. He’s a very rich man.’

Hadley shook his head. ‘I shall track him down yet,’ he said. ‘Oh, yes, I—’

At that moment a loud knock sounded on the outer door of the flat, followed by a sharp ringing of the electric bell. Jocelyn rose.

‘Excuse me a moment,’ he said. ‘As my man is out, I must go to the door myself.’

He came back after a while, carrying an exceedingly dirty and crumpled envelope, at which he was staring wonderingly.

‘This precious document has just arrived by a messenger who reported that he had it from a bloke in Upper Baker Street wot give him a half-crown, and said as how I would give him anuvver if he got ‘ere strite,’ he said, laughing. ‘More mystery, Hadley!’

‘Open the note,’ said Hadley.

Jocelyn tore open the envelope and drew out a sheet of very common paper. He uttered a sharp exclamation.

‘Jannaway!’ he said. ‘By all that’s wonderful! Listen.

> ‘SIR,—I beg pardon for making so bold as to ask you in receipt of this note to come up at once to the railway bridge at the back of the Great Central Station, and to walk across it from the west to the east side, keeping on the right-hand side of the bridge, where you will be met by yours very respectfully.
>
> CLARENCE JANNAWAY.’

Hadley jumped to his feet.

‘Come right there!’ he said excitedly. ‘That man of yours has the face of a ferret!’

3

In five minutes the two men were careering up Park Lane in a motor-cab, both wondering what it was that they were going to hear or see.

'Something connected with what we've been talking about, sure!' said Hadley. 'Especially if this fellow Jannaway, as you say, has been curious ever since he witnessed Rederdale's death. Oh—we'll make good yet! By the by, did I tell you, how that ransom is to be paid on the fourth day from now? No!—well, your Home Secretary said I could tell you anything, so I'll tell you. It's to be paid in diamonds.'

'Diamonds!' exclaimed Jocelyn. 'Diamonds? Impossible.'

'Diamonds all the same,' replied Hadley. 'That's another mystery and another link. I understand from the Home Secretary that the amount of the ransom instead of being handed over in notes or specie is to be laid out in diamonds of the finest quality, and this value is to be attested and guaranteed by two separate firms of your best diamond experts, which guarantees are to accompany them. When received by the gang their expert will value them, and if they are found to be all right a formal receipt will be sent to your Government and the affair will be at an end.'

'And where and how are they to be handed over?' asked Jocelyn.

Hadley laughed.

'That very important detail,' he said, 'must remain a profound secret to the Home Secretary and two or three others. I don't know, and can't even guess. Say, this is a queer corner of the town.'

They were now threading the mean and colourless streets of Lison Grove, and Jocelyn, stopping the motor-cab and asking information from its driver, took his companion the rest of the journey on foot. They soon found the bridge which spans the Great Central Railway at the rear of the station and proceeded across it. There were few people about and the summer night

was growing to its darkest. Out of the gloom Jannaway suddenly emerged, and in the light of the nearest lamp glanced suspiciously at the American.

'It's all right, Jannaway,' said Jocelyn. 'You can speak freely before Mr Hadley.'

'Come this way a little, then, if you please, sir,' said Jannaway. 'We shall not be noticed if we walk up and down.' He drew nearer to his master and lowered his voice. 'It's about the Italian gentleman, Mr Chenery, sir—can I speak before Mr Hadley about him?'

Jocelyn gasped with astonishment. What had his valet been up to?

'The Italian gentleman!' he exclaimed. 'Signor Vespucci?'

'Gently, if you please, sir—you never know who's about here,' said Jannaway. 'Yes, sir—him. He's close by here.'

'Close by here? Speak out, Jannaway!' said Jocelyn, impatiently. 'Mr Hadley knows as much as I do—more. Speak out! Where is the man you mean?'

Jannaway motioned them to walk a little further down the slope of the bridge leading to Upper Baker Street. Suddenly pausing and leaning over the parapet he directed his companions' attention to a street which ran southward from the ground level below the bridge towards the Marylebone Road—a street which in the dim light of a few gas-lamps looked to be poor and mean.

'The Italian's down there, sir,' he said. 'You see that second gas-lamp on the left-hand side? He's in the house just beyond it.'

'Good Heavens, how do you know, Jannaway?' exclaimed Jocelyn, staring down the dismal, almost deserted street.

'Because I followed him from St John's Wood, sir,' replied the valet.

'Followed him! What, in his chair?' asked Jocelyn.

Jannaway looked around him. No one was near, but he dropped his voice to something like a whisper.

'He wasn't in any chair, sir,' he said. 'He walked.'

On hearing this remarkable statement both men turned on Jannaway with an instinctive surprise. But it was only Jocelyn who spoke—Hadley, after a swift glance at the valet's confident and calm face turned his head sharply and made a little clicking noise with his tongue, as if he suddenly comprehended something.

'Impossible, Jannaway!' said Jocelyn. 'He's been paralysed for years. You must be mistaken.'

But the valet shook his head.

'No, sir,' he said. 'There's no mistake, sir. It's this way, you see, sir. Ever since you told me to follow Mr Rederdale from Waterloo, sir, I've always felt an interest in that house in St John's Wood, and after what happened before your eyes and mine, sir, in Down Street, my interest has been greater. And the events of the past fortnight or so have added a fresh interest, sir, and in my spare time I have made a few observations and investigations.'

'Going in for amateur detective work, eh?' said Hadley, while Jocelyn listened in silent astonishment.

Jannaway coughed—a cough deprecatory of his own powers.

'Well, I have always had a liking for the investigation of crime, sir,' he said, 'and a taste for reading what one may term the literature of the subject. And as I do not frequent bars or billiard rooms, sir, when I have any time to myself, which is approximately every night in the week, I thought I might do worse than keep an eye on that house and its inhabitants. It is an occupation which has its dangers, sir, but it also has its compensations,' concluded Jannaway. 'And also its excitements.'

'Well, well?' said Jocelyn, impatiently. 'You have evidently discovered something, Jannaway. What is it?'

'As you have visited the house, sir, you are, of course, aware that there is a building in the garden which is used as a laboratory,' said Jannaway.

'Yes—yes!' said Jocelyn. 'What of it?'

'Merely that I have discovered a method of observing what takes place within it, sir,' replied the valet.

'Good Heavens, how did you do that?' exclaimed Jocelyn. 'Why, I should have thought the place was sight-proof and soundproof! Shouldn't you, Hadley?'

The American, who was listening with the deepest interest to all that Jannaway said, merely nodded his head.

'Let him go on,' he said. 'This is interesting.'

'You may not be aware, sir,' continued the valet, 'that next door to the Villa Firenza is the house and studio once occupied by Mr Wrensford, the eminent sculptor. It has long been to let, and is, in fact, in a much-neglected state. Nobody looks after it, which made it all the easier for me to gain access to it.'

'Ah!' said Hadley. 'Clever—clever!'

‘I was able, with a little finesse and great circumspection, sir, to devise a means of entering the studio of this house,’ continued Jannaway, ‘and once there I found out a way of looking into the laboratory, which abuts upon it. I have kept watch there on several occasions—I have seen you there twice, Mr Hadley—but until tonight I never saw anything of interest. Tonight I did. When dusk fell the Italian was wheeled into the laboratory by a maid. He evidently gave her some instructions and she left him. To my great astonishment she had no sooner gone than he sprang, quite actively, out of his chair and secured the door. There is a portion of the laboratory boarded off, as you know, gentlemen. He unlocked the door of this, entered, and was within for some minutes. When he came out again he was dressed as a working-man and disguised.’

Jocelyn’s mind immediately flew to the emissary who had waited on Mr Pontifex. Was it possible that—but he restrained his curiosity and said nothing.

‘I don’t suppose you know, gentlemen,’ continued Jannaway, ‘that there is a secret door to that laboratory. There is—it is concealed in a very clever way. He let himself out by this, and from my knowledge of the locality I knew where he must emerge. I slipped out of my hiding place with the intention of following him. I soon perceived him and I followed him into Grove End Road and eventually to this bridge. When I had traced him to the house which I pointed out to you, I sent the note down to you, sir, thinking that you would be interested in my discovery.’

‘Interested!’ exclaimed Hadley. ‘This is great!’

‘Since I have watched the house down there, sir,’ said Jannaway, ‘three other men have entered it. No one has left.’

Jocelyn was thinking deeply. Suddenly an idea struck him.

‘He’s bound to go back to the laboratory,’ he said. ‘Jannaway, could you get Mr Hadley and myself into that hiding place of yours?’

‘I could, sir, if you will be so good as to be very cautious,’ replied the valet.

‘Are you game, Hadley?’ asked Jocelyn. ‘I’ve an idea!’

‘Game!’ said Hadley. ‘Let’s be going.’

All three set off in the direction of St John’s Wood.

Part 7

The Account Is Settled

1

Instead of leading his companions to the neighbourhood of the Villa Firenza by the route which he had described Vespucci as taking, Jannaway conducted them to the Regent's Park side of the bridge, and turning up by St John's Wood Church led them along the east side of Lord's Cricket Ground as far as Curtain Road, where he plunged into the small and leafy byways which lie between Grove End Road and Wellington Road. At that time of night there were few people about in these streets; here and there they encountered a belated pair of lovers; here and there a householder stood at the door of his jealously-walled-in garden; here and there a maidservant looked out upon the green which fenced her small world in. The night was warm and dark and mysterious; the waving branches which hung over the garden walls made great patches of shade, wherein it was easy to lose identity.

'We had better not be seen walking in company down the street which we are coming to at the next turning, sir,' said Jannaway. 'I will go on in front. When you turn the next corner keep straight ahead on your right—this pavement—until you hear me make a slight noise—just a whisper—at your elbow. That will be by a partly-open door set in a garden wall. Slip in there, sir. There's nothing to fear—the policeman who comes on this round isn't due for a good hour, and it's not likely there'll be anybody about. If there should happen to be when you hear me just go on a little further and then turn back.'

Jannaway vanished amongst the shadows, and Jocelyn and Hadley followed him slowly. Turning the next corner they found a very quiet-looking street of detached houses of the villa type so intimately associated with St John's Wood, each more or less hidden by trees and fenced in from its surroundings by high walls. Everything was very quiet, no one was to be seen

in the faint light of the gas-lamps, and the noise and rattle of Edgware Road and Maida Vale was reduced to a murmur.

'This is a queer business—about Vespucci being able to walk,' said Jocelyn as they walked slowly along.

'I'm not surprised,' said Hadley. 'I shan't be surprised at anything. I've long thought there was some deep scheme behind all this. I'm prepared to see anything.'

'I wonder what we shall see—or hear?' said Jocelyn, meditatively.

'Don't know,' responded the American, half carelessly. 'Something that will help, no doubt. By the way, are you armed?'

'Armed!' exclaimed Jocelyn. 'Good Heavens, no!'

'Then you'd better be,' said Hadley, drawing a revolver from some handy receptacle and pushing it into his companion's hand. 'You're not depriving me—I've got another. Be careful with it—it's loaded just as much as it can be. That little man of yours has provided himself.'

'What, Jannaway? Carrying a revolver? How do you know?' cried Jocelyn, wondering more and more at the turn things were taking.

'I just felt his hip-pocket while he was talking to us.' answered Hadley. 'One's got to learn a good deal when one's on a job like mine. Say, he's a real smart young fellow, this smart valet of yours!—he's not the sort to let grass grow under him.'

At that instant the smart young fellow said 'Hist!' close by them, and within the second they found themselves inside a walled garden, which for a moment seemed dark as a primaeval forest.

'Speak only in whispers, gentlemen,' said Jannaway. 'This is the garden of the house that Mr Wrensford used to live in—it's a pretty big one, and full of trees and shrubberies and all in a tangle through being neglected. If you will allow me to take your hand, Mr Chenery, sir, and Mr Hadley will take yours, I'll lead you round to the back of the house, where I have discovered a means of entrance to it and the old studio.'

Picking his way through the darkness with the skill of a Red Indian on the trail of an enemy, Jannaway conducted his companions between clumps of box and laurel, azalea and rhododendrons, until they found themselves under the walls of the house, which in the starlight seemed to be a building of irregular shape, with many wings projecting at unexpected angles. Above one of these wings rose the high roof of the studio, overtopping the maples

and aspens which surrounded it; the light of a particularly brilliant star was reflected in its glass shutters.

'The laboratory is behind that, gentlemen,' said Jannaway. 'Now, I'm sorry, but the only way into the house is through this trap-door at my feet. There's no great drop—it's only about three feet.'

'Here, I'll go first,' said Hadley, as Jannaway raised a wooden trap and revealed a black cavity. 'Which way shall I stand aside when I'm down?'

'Any side, sir,' replied the valet. 'It's only a coal-cellar. We'll have a light when we're all down.'

Once within the cellar and the trap-door safely closed above them Jannaway struck a match and from behind a pile of boarding produced a dark lantern, which he lighted. He threw its light on a flight of whitewashed stairs.

'This way, gentlemen,' he said. 'There's no fear of any light being seen from outside—we're quite safe.'

He led them up the stairs and into a kitchen, the window-shutters of which were all closed and barred. From this they passed through several other apartments, all cold, empty, smelling of disuse and must; all secured as to window and door. And at the end of a stone-paved passage Jannaway opened a double door and admitted them into the studio. Through its glass roof they saw the stars in the dark sky.

'You can't see much with this lantern, gentlemen,' said Jannaway. 'But I daresay you can see that all round this studio there's a gallery, pretty high up. Now, the roof of the laboratory next door is about half the height of this studio. Up there in the gallery is a small circular window, big enough for a man to pass through. What I've done, gentlemen, was to get through that, let myself down to the roof of the laboratory by a rope, unscrew a patent ventilator they've got fixed in it, and look in. It's simple—and so far nobody who's ever been in the laboratory has ever thought of looking up at the ceiling when I've been there, and if they had, they wouldn't have seen me, for there's a sort of gauze stuff over it that makes a good veil. Shall we go up, gentlemen?'

Hadley signed to him to lead on, and they passed up to the gallery and to the circular window of which the valet had spoken. The window was of no great size and the American looked doubtfully at it.

'You'll get through, sir,' said Jannaway. 'I'll go first and prospect. The rope's perfectly secure, gentlemen, but let yourselves down very gently on

the roof.'

In another moment Jannaway had gone through the window with the agility of a monkey: Hadley and Jocelyn followed him more slowly and cautiously. As Jocelyn slid down the rope to find himself standing on the flat roof of the laboratory, the valet came creeping towards them with upraised finger.

'Be careful, gentlemen!' he whispered. 'Get down on the roof and slide along to the ventilator. The young lady is there!'

It was all that Jocelyn could do to refrain from uttering an exclamation of surprise; as for Hadley, he had dropped down on the flat roof of the laboratory as soon as the valet spoke and was now gliding towards the ventilator as stealthily as a snake. With a hasty look round, which convinced him that the roof was secure from observation, because of the screen of high trees on three sides and the wall of the studio on the fourth, Jocelyn followed the example of his companions and began to crawl across the leaden partitions. He was conscious that they were thick with dust and the accumulated soot and grime of the London atmosphere, conscious that his hands and his knees were suffering and that his linen would suffer too, but a vast curiosity filled him—he wanted to know, must know, what was going on in the laboratory beneath.

It was easy enough to see into the laboratory once you were over the ventilator. This, a circular affair of some size, fitted to its socket in the roof like a screw cap, removed, it revealed a fitting of gauzelike metal, through which one could see as one sees through the meshes of a meat-safe. Hadley and Jannaway, prone on their stomachs, were gazing down through this when Jocelyn joined them; he too advanced his face to the opening and looked within.

The laboratory was lighted only at one of its many divisions. Almost beneath them, at an experimenting-table, on which a standard electric lamp was placed, stood Signorina Pepita, intently regarding a small crucible which was set on a tripod beneath which burned a white flame of extraordinary intensity, and of a glare so brilliant that it scorched the naked eye. Jocelyn found himself blinking at it; he noticed then that the girl was wearing disfiguring spectacles of blue glass.

Pepita was regarding a watch with apparent anxiety. She suddenly laid it down and took off the lid of the small crucible with a pair of wire-like tongs. For an instant the watchers saw the contents—a mere seething and

bubbling mass of phosphorescent flame; the next the girl had emptied into it a white powder and had replaced the lid. Once more she watched the seconds and the minutes pass; suddenly she touched a spring beneath the crucible and the glowing flame died out as a lightning flash disappears in the earth. The experiment, or operation, or whatever it was, was over.

The next proceeding savoured of mystery to the watchers. Using the delicately-fashioned tongs again Pepita lifted the crucible from the tripod and deposited it in a cavity in the floor, which she revealed by displacing one of the white marble slabs with which the laboratory was paved. That done and the slab replaced she betook herself to cleaning, tidying and rearranging the table at which she had been busy. In a few minutes all was put straight, more light was turned on, Pepita opened the garden door with a key which she produced from her bosom, and vanished. Hadley and Jocelyn saw then that Vespucci's wheeled chair stood near the door, within reach of the electric buttons which controlled the mechanism of the place.

Ten minutes—twenty minutes—half an hour passed; at last, through the door in the rear of the laboratory to which Jannaway had silently directed their attention, Vespucci appeared, clothed, as the valet had said, like a workman. He walked easily and confidently across the laboratory to the shut-off room, and producing what was evidently a key, let himself in and disappeared. Ten minutes later he came out. The faultlessly-attired Signor Vespucci unlocked the garden door, seated himself in his wheeled chair, and touched one of the electric buttons. From somewhere in the house sounded the sharp ringing of a bell. A maid appeared at the laboratory door; in another moment the laboratory was in darkness and its master gone. But before the maid appeared and the wheeled chair disappeared Vespucci had placed one hand in the side pocket of his lounge coat and had withdrawn it full of something which caught the electric light and flashed back its radiance in a thousand coruscating beams. The watchers gasped.

A handful of glittering diamonds!

Hadley, Jocelyn and Jannaway made their way back to the rope and the circular window. One by one they climbed through to the gallery. But the last had only just set foot there when a dozen lights flashed out all round them and revealed a posse of formidable, stern-faced police!

2

Before the three self-appointed detectives had had time to realise the predicament in which they stood, they found themselves securely handcuffed and at the mercy of their captors, who proceeded to take a closer look at them by the light of their lanterns. Thus viewed, Hadley laughed; Jannaway preserved a stern and grim demeanour, and Jocelyn began to expostulate.

'I say, you know, this is all an awful mistake!' he said, appealing to an important-looking Inspector who was in charge of the party. 'It's a tremendous mistake, really! We—'

But the Inspector sternly cut him short.

'You can talk as much as you like later on,' he said. 'Just now you can hold your tongue. Go over them, some of you men.'

The constables, now that their captives were securely handcuffed, were quite ready to make personal investigations of them, and in another minute the three prisoners had been relieved of their revolvers.

'Armed!' exclaimed the Inspector. 'Ah!'

'Say!' remarked Hadley in an exaggerated drawl. 'You better instruct that man of yours who's playing with my shooting-iron to be tender with it—it's loaded up, and it has a trick of going off in a fashion about as unexpected as the way you got us.'

'One of you take all three revolvers and be careful with them,' said the Inspector. 'Now then—downstairs!'

The police, of whom there were about a dozen, closed in upon their prisoners and began to hustle them towards the stairs. Jocelyn, who was not without a temper, shook off the hands laid upon his arms and turned angrily to the Inspector.

‘Look here!’ he said. ‘I tell you you’re making a tremendous mistake. I’m Mr Jocelyn Chenery, Lord Hadminstowe’s son—’

‘You look it!’ said the Inspector with a glance at Jocelyn’s soot and dust begrimed clothes, hands and face. ‘You do!’

‘You may sneer as you like, but I am speaking the truth,’ answered Jocelyn, angrily. ‘You will find my card case in my pocket if you take the trouble. And this is my valet, Jannaway, and this gentleman is a well-known American millionaire. You’re only making trouble for yourselves.’

‘And what are you noblemen and their valets and American millionaires, all armed, doing on other people’s roofs at this time o’ night?’ asked the Inspector, scathingly. ‘Tell that to the Marines, my lad! Now then, men, get ’em downstairs.’

Jocelyn was about to retort angrily, but Hadley caught his eye and shook his head, and Jannaway’s smooth, calm voice fell on his ear.

‘If I should advise, sir, I should say nothing,’ said the valet, ‘I should say nothing. These officers are only doing their duty. We can explain our anomalous position at the station.’

‘Ho-ho! here’s a Solomon for you!’ exclaimed the Inspector. ‘I doubt whether you haven’t picked up your knowledge in the dock, my young Attorney-General. Valet, indeed!’

Jannaway favoured the Inspector with a pitying smile and marched calmly downstairs, Jocelyn following him in a fury. Arrived on the floor of the studio, Hadley, who seemed to take the whole thing as a joke, turned to the man who held his right arm.

‘Say,’ he said laconically, ‘in my right-hand pocket there’s a cigar case—do you mind taking a cigar out, putting it in my mouth and applying a light to it? And help yourself too.’

The Inspector bustled forward angrily.

‘Now then, none of your Yankee swagger here!’ he said. ‘Leave my men alone—get on, men.’

One of the constables opened a door of the studio which led into the garden; the procession trooped out into the cool night.

It was fortunate that the arrest thus smartly effected took place at such a late hour, otherwise the march of Jocelyn and his companions to the police station would surely have been accompanied by a curious and more or less objectionable crowd. Through the almost deserted streets of St John’s Wood the procession passed quietly enough, but when more populous thorough-

fares were reached, a goodly number of belated pedestrians, midnight loiterers and night-birds in general, gathered about it, and the three conspirators were not sorry to find themselves inside the repelling air of the outpost of justice. From the zealous and jealous way in which they were guarded, it was evident that they were looked upon as burglars of a violent nature, and their preliminary examination was conducted behind practically closed doors.

'Who do you say you are?' demanded the officer in charge, eyeing all three severely after a whispered colloquy with the Inspector. As he looked more particularly at Jocelyn, and seemed inclined to trust him less than the other two, Jocelyn hastened to reply to the question and summoned as much dignity as was consistent with his dirty and dishevelled appearance.

'I have already told the Inspector who I am, and who my friends are,' he replied, 'And—'

'Each answer for himself,' said the official, peremptorily. 'Well—you first. And no nonsense!'

'Why should there be any nonsense?' asked Jocelyn. 'If I had not these handcuffs on I would give you my card. I am the Honourable Jocelyn Spencer Chenery, a son of the Earl of Hadminstowe. Until his death, two weeks since, I was a private secretary to the late Prime Minister, Mr Pontifex. I reside at 520A Down Street, Piccadilly.'

The officer in charge, who had listened to Jocelyn's personal statement with an ever-changing countenance, turned to Hadley.

'And you?' he said.

'My name,' said the American, with one of his quiet smiles, 'is John Hadley Stamford. I am a free-born American citizen. I have a house in Philadelphia; I also have a house in New York on Riverside Drive. My address in London is the Ritz Hotel, Piccadilly, where I rent a suite of rooms at a very big figure. There is a business here in London which belongs to me and is run under my Christian names, but I don't work any at that. I am not of any business or profession, I am also a millionaire, if that is of any interest to you.'

'And who's this sharp-nosed person?' inquired the official, who was obviously inclined to believe that he was having his leg pulled. 'The Duke of all the Russias, I suppose?'

'My name is Clarence Jannaway,' said the unruffled valet. 'I am valet to the Honourable Mr Chenery. Like Mr Chenery's, my address is 520A

Down Street.'

The officer in charge looked all three up and down. Then he turned to the Inspector and nodded his head.

'Turn them out,' he said briefly.

Those officials who could get near began to open their mouths and eyes as various articles, objects and papers were produced from the pockets of the prisoners. True, Jannaway's turning out brought nothing more serious to light than a cigarette-case, in aluminium, and his master's a similar article in gold, but Hadley seemed to carry a number of things about with him, to say nothing of a considerable sum in cash.

'I'd just have you know,' he said dryly as the articles were being turned over on the Inspector's table, 'that there's some ten or twelve thousand pounds in your Bank of England notes in that wallet, and their numbers are posted up in my book at the Ritz. And you take care of that diamond—it's worth a fortune.'

The officer in charge motioned the Inspector to put all the things together.

'Take these handcuffs off,' he said peremptorily. 'Put the valet in the cells and bring these gentlemen into the office.'

'No!' said Jocelyn, firmly. 'I object to my servant being treated in any different manner than myself. He is no more guilty of any crime than we are, and if he is not treated properly the Home Secretary shall hear of it.'

The official made no sign of having heard this, but said something in a low tone to a sergeant. Then he pointed to an open door.

'Step in there, Mr Hadley and Mr Chenery,' he said. 'Your man will be treated all right—he shall have a chair in the waiting room. Now,' he continued, following them into the room and closing the door upon them and himself, 'I am taking you at your own valuation and supposing you to be the persons named on your cards and personal effects, though, as I don't know either of you personally, you might, for all I know, have stolen these things from their rightful owners. And what I want to know is—what were you two gentlemen, men of position and wealth, doing, armed, on the roof of that laboratory tonight, after having broken into the adjacent empty house?'

Jocelyn and Hadley looked at each other. Neither was unaware of the fact that their secret must be protected. And for a while neither spoke.

'You'll have to give some account of yourself, you know,' said the official. 'If you were Dukes or Marquesses that's no excuse for your conduct.

Our men have only done their duty, and if you've any sense of justice you ought to admit that they were very smart.'

'I admit that our conduct seems very suspicious,' said Jocelyn.

The official laughed.

'Suspicious!' he said. 'I hope you can prove that you are what you say you are and give a satisfactory explanation for your behaviour, otherwise—um! Why, we've been watching that man of yours for the last few nights, but he's been too smart for us. We had men inside the grounds tonight, however, who saw you all enter. Now, what is your explanation?'

'We are in a very awkward position,' replied Jocelyn. 'Now, do you think it possible that either Mr Hadley or I would have any evil object in doing what we did?'

The official spread out his hands.

'My dear sir!' he exclaimed despairingly, 'What am I expected to know about intentions? If I believed the bare words of every man brought in here—Can't you give some explanation?' he said, interrupting himself.

Hadley and Jocelyn whispered together. Jocelyn at last turned to the official. 'We can, if you will respect our confidence,' he said. 'In fact, we can tell you everything.'

And tell him they did, with the result that the official's eyes grew rounder, and his mouth opened wider, and he said that there were certainly queerer things in the world than anyone would dream of.

'But you'll have to get someone responsible down from the Home Office,' he said, 'and there'll be nobody there until morning. I'll make you as comfortable as I can, gentlemen, and you shall have some supper, and your man too, Mr Chenery.'

Half an hour later Jannaway was invited to partake of a cold collation, which was accompanied by a foaming tankard of half-and-half.

'Ah, you're one of the lucky ones, you are!' said his custodian. 'You was a desprit burgular not so long since, and now you're a Ar toff. Sich is the ups and downs of life!'

'I was born a philosopher,' said Jannaway, and fell upon the tankard.

3

The little world of a police station is pretty much like all those other little worlds which go towards making up the big one: it has its lights and shades, its ebbs and flows of feeling; it is, in a short phrase, quite ordinary and human. Like all the other worlds it is subject to one sentiment at one time and to another at another time, and its professional occupants are as fond of a bit of excitement and harmless gossip as any lady of the street corners. Accordingly, it gave a pleasant fillip to the night's proceedings when the rumour gradually filtered through that the three men caught in St John's Wood were not burglars at all, but persons around whom mystery and romance was clinging tenaciously, one of them a real live lord's son and the other one of those American millionaires who can afford to light half-crown cigars with five-pound banknotes. No cells for such as these—certainly not, but as comfortable quarters as the station could afford, and in the morning just a mere formality before release, and in the meantime the semblance of surveillance.

It may have been this semblance of surveillance that suggested to the active-minded Mr Clarence Jannaway that his talents might be much more profitably exercised than in trying to sleep on an improvised couch in the stuffy waiting room of a police station. He had enjoyed his cold collation and the tankard of half-and-half had done him good; he had cracked various jokes with the sergeant detailed to attend to him, and he was not dissatisfied with his quarters as quarters go, but sleep he could not, and his brain was busy. And before the early summer dawn came Mr Jannaway, carefully prospecting his immediate surroundings and finding that the only man in the outer office was nodding in a corner, slipped like an eel through that outer office and was out in the street and round several turnings in about as much time as it takes to pronounce the mystic phrase Jack Robinson.

This news was communicated to Jocelyn and Hadley by the official, who had melted on gaining some notion of their proper status and condition. He had shown them much politeness and accommodated them with supper and sofas, and he now looked aggrieved and injured.

'After my easy-goingness last night,' he said, looking in upon them in the grey morning, 'I naturally expected to be treated as a gentleman. But you may do all sorts of good turns to some people and they only turn and rend you in the end, in a way of speaking.'

The two pseudo-prisoners looked at each other and then at the official.

'What is the matter?' asked Jocelyn.

'Serves me right for not making sure until I was sure!' said the official, ambiguously.

'My friend,' observed Hadley, 'we are not accustomed to solve conundrums at this early hour of the day. Perhaps you will tell us in plain English if anything unusual has occurred?'

'Occurred?' said the official, who was obviously hurt. 'Yes! That precious manservant of yours has escaped.'

'Jannaway!' exclaimed Jocelyn.

'Jannaway was the name given, as you are aware, sir,' replied the officer. 'Now, why does Jannaway want to escape from custody if he was innocent and all you say is true?'

Jocelyn made no immediate reply to this direct question, and the official sniffed.

'He may have gone for an early morning walk,' suggested Hadley. 'Or to get a glass of new milk. Or maybe he didn't like his bed.'

The official glared at the American and sniffed again. He turned to Jocelyn.

'After all my kindness—' he began.

'Yes, yes!' Jocelyn hastened to say. 'I'm sure it must look very strange indeed. Escaped, eh? I wonder what he's done that for.'

'Ah!' said the official. 'So do I! And you can't deny that it looks uncommonly fishy.'

'Are you referring to us?' demanded Jocelyn, icily.

'There's an old saying that men are known by the company they keep,' replied the official. 'From the sharp way in which that young man got out I should say he's been in this place before.'

‘I am quite sure that he has not,’ said Jocelyn, ‘and if you have any doubt about myself and my friend, Mr Hadley, you will have it removed as soon as you get these messages off. And don’t forget the direct message to the Home Secretary.’

‘I’ll take care nobody else escapes, anyway,’ said the official who was evidently deeply hurt, and he ostentatiously jingled certain keys which he had brought in with him. ‘I was too soft-hearted last night, and that’s a fact.’

Left alone, Hadley and Jocelyn looked at each other and laughed.

‘Say, my opinion of that man of yours goes up every minute,’ said Hadley. ‘He’s real smart. Now, I wonder what he’s up to in this latest move. It’s very evident that his active mind had no idea of being caged in here while there was work to do. I just bet he’s gone back to that house after something or other.’

‘That Jannaway has some notion in his head I’ve no doubt,’ replied Jocelyn. ’At the same time he oughtn’t to have left here in that way when he was on parole, as one might say.’

‘Oh, shucks!’ said Hadley. ‘If the way was clear, why shouldn’t he walk out if he wished to? He hadn’t done anything, and he knew he was certain to be cleared in the morning when the folks from the Home Office come around, and maybe he reckoned on being better employed outside. It’s my belief that Jannaway’ll turn up again.’

In this belief Hadley proved himself right. At eight o’clock, when the two prisoners were feeling somewhat doleful and forlorn because there was no proper toilet accommodation, no clean clothing, none of life’s little morning conveniences and luxuries, the door was suddenly opened and their gaoler entered, looking almost apoplectic.

‘Hanged if I don’t think this man of yours is the coolest and most impudent young fellow I ever heard of!’ he said. ‘He goes and runs away in the night as if it didn’t matter, and here he turns up in the morning as bold as brass. This isn’t a blooming hotel, young man!’

Jocelyn and Hadley turned to find the imperturbable Jannaway standing in the doorway. Jannaway had obviously taken advantage of his French leave to perform the sacred rites of his own toilet. He was immaculately groomed; his pepper-and-salt suit was the perfection of neatness, a sense of fragrant soap and fresh linen hung about him. And in each hand he carried a suitcase, and under one arm a walking stick, mounted in gold. He made his politest bow.

‘Good morning, sir,’ he said, turning to Jocelyn. ‘Good morning, Mr Hadley. I have brought your things, sir, and as I felt sure Mr Hadley would require his also, I went round to the Hotel Ritz and got them—they know me there, sir, so I had no difficulty about obtaining access to your room. I hope I have brought all you need, sir.’

‘Well, that’s smarter than ever!’ said Hadley. ‘Say mister, I felt sure this young man would come back, and here he is. You’ve been raising trouble, Jannaway, by your scooting off.’

Jannaway, who was laying out clothes and linen, looked blankly at the open-mouthed official.

‘I am sorry if I have occasioned any trouble,’ he said, ‘but as I was unable to sleep, and as I knew everything would be made right in the morning, I thought I might as well fetch clean things for my master and Mr Hadley. I made no noise in leaving this place, I assure you.’

The official elevated his eyebrows and signified in dumb show that such coolness was beyond him.

‘I’ve sent those messages, Mr Chenery,’ he said. ‘And I don’t care how soon they’re answered. I shall be glad to see the last of you gentlemen—a few affairs like this would upset any respectable police station.’

The desire of the official mind was to be fulfilled much more quickly and thoroughly than anybody immediately concerned had expected. The Home Secretary of that day, instead of being a middle-aged and dry-as-dust lawyer, weighted on one side with precedent and on the other with conventionality, was a young and ardent politician who had great ideas of work and activity and none of self-effacement; if there were things to be done he liked to be in at the doing of them, and the time-honoured idea that a Secretary of State should be a sort of abstract quality, sitting at a small desk in a barrack-like building of Whitehall, found no favour in his eyes. Consequently, when Jocelyn’s message reached him at what to most people would have seemed an unusually early hour of the morning, but was nothing of the sort to him, he immediately realised that here was a new development of this remarkable affair and shot into a state of nervous energy, which communicated itself to those about him. Within a few minutes of the receipt of the message, he was on his way to Scotland Yard; within a few minutes of his arrival there he was off again in company with two detectives of high position to the outlying police station from whence the message had come. And Hadley and Jocelyn had barely finished their toilets and were consider-

ing a suggestion of Jannaway's as to his procuring a homely breakfast for them from the nearest tavern, when the energetic Minister was ushered into their presence.

'Of course you must be out of this at once,' he said, shaking them both by the hand. 'That shall be done as soon as you're ready. But now, Chenery, what is this mysterious news that you hint at in your message? This is Superintendent Follingsbee—this, Inspector Sheringham—I brought them with me in case expert dealing with this matter might be wanted. Now go ahead and tell us exactly what all this is.'

Thus adjured, and everybody but the Home Secretary, the two detectives, Hadley and Jannaway being shut out of the room, Jocelyn narrated the events of the previous evening up to the time of the arrest of himself and his companions. And at the mention of the diamonds which they had seen Vespucci produce from his pocket for one brief moment the young Minister whistled a most unministerial whistle.

'Whew!' he exclaimed. 'Diamonds! By Jove!—the ransom was paid over last night. And paid in diamonds!'

Then they all stared at each other, beginning to realise that at last the mystery of the ransom for London was about to be broken in upon and perhaps solved.

4

The Home Secretary broke the silence which followed his own last words.

'Look here,' he said in his impetuous way, 'if chance, or accident, or whatever it may be, has brought us within measurable distance of getting at this thing we ought to act. There is no pledge on the part of the Ministry to give these people safe-conduct. If we can arrest them we have the right to do so. I am for going to this house at once. But—'

He paused and looked at the stern faces of the men gathered about him.

'You know the awful power which these people have exercised,' he said. 'They may destroy us as they destroyed those others at the Hotel Petronia.'

'Death or no death!' said Hadley between his teeth, 'I guess I am going into that house before this day is much older.'

'I'll go with you,' said Jocelyn, pressing his arm. The elder of the two detectives glanced at the Home Secretary.

'We might go down there and make some observations, sir,' he suggested. 'The great thing is to avoid arousing suspicion on the part of the inmates of the house.'

The Home Secretary suddenly snapped his fingers joyously. He was obviously in his element in making a plan of campaign. As he had been a dashing soldier in his very extreme youth, and was still interested in auxiliary militarism, this was only natural and becoming.

'I have it!' he exclaimed. 'I know a man who lives close by these people—Bellingham, the novelist. He will lend us his house as a basis for our operations. We'd better go.'

After some further consultation it was decided that in order to avoid anything which might direct attention to them they should split up into parties and approach Mr Bellingham's house at different times and from different directions, the Home Secretary, with Jocelyn and Hadley, going first to pre-

pare the unsuspecting novelist for an invasion upon his premises. It seemed to Hadley and Jocelyn that something in the form of breakfast would be welcome, but the Home Secretary was obviously on the war-path and scenting the smoke of battle, and they only paused to receive their belongings from the police before being whirled away with him in his powerful automobile.

'Mrs Bellingham will give you a cup of tea or coffee,' said the Home Secretary. 'You can breakfast afterwards. I have not breakfasted myself yet. Business first. What a glorious thing if we could break up this gang and recover our ten millions!' he exclaimed and ordered his man to drive faster.

Arrived at Bellingham's house Hadley and Jocelyn contrived to intimate to that gentleman that they were starving, and they were immediately placed at a breakfast-table, around which the members of the family had been gathered when the Home Secretary burst in upon them. As for that energetic individual he could neither be persuaded to sit down nor to eat and drink standing up; he was given a cup of coffee, but walked about with it, fuming and fretting, until the detectives, a couple of local men in plain clothes, and Jannaway arrived, one party at the front, another at the side entrance. Then he called a council of war as to what was to be done, and it was finally arranged that Inspector Sheringham, as a preliminary step, should proceed to the Villa Firenza and on some pretence or other seek to effect an entrance. Jannaway was to accompany him, and if Sheringham gained admittance, was to speed back and inform the rest of the party, whose leader could then determine what next to do.

'You'd better not be seen with me at all,' remarked Sheringham as he and Jannaway marched down Bellingham's garden. 'Fourth house on the right hand going down the next street—name in brass letters on top of the door, eh? Oh—well, you cut out first, d'ye see, and hang about the top end of that street promiscuous like. If I go in, off you come back here; if I don't, well, I don't.'

'Just so,' said Jannaway. 'I understand. And I don't suppose you'll have any difficulty about getting inside the garden, but what are you going to do when you get there?'

The graduate in the intricate science of detection looked at the would-be novice pityingly.

'Ah!' he said. 'What shall I do? Yes, of course. When you've seen as much as I have, young man—which you never will—you'll be as ready as I

am at what is called subterfuge. Once inside I shall do very well. I am celebrated for resource. I may have called to recommend a new Insurance system. I may be canvassing for orders for a new family Bible. I may be the Water Rate, I may be the man from the Electric Light. Oh, yes! Now you cut—I don't want to be seen leaving these gates with you.'

Jannaway cut in accordance with the detective's orders and ere long lounged at the end of the quiet little road in which the Villa Firenza made the last house. He hung about until Sheringham appeared; then, while affecting to read a conveniently-placed placard which announced the sale of certain desirable ground-rents in that neighbourhood, he kept the tail of his eye on him and waited developments.

Sheringham, in accordance with the instructions on the brass plating of the garden door, knocked and rang and got no answer. He knocked and rang again at the end of a couple of minutes; at the end of five he repeated the summons. When ten minutes had elapsed the door still remained closed, he came towards Jannaway, lifting a beckoning finger. The valet hastened to meet him.

'I can't make anybody hear,' said the detective. 'It strikes me there's something up. Look here, you keep your eye on that garden door while I go back and report. We may have to break in. I don't like that silence that hangs about the place. Keep a smart lookout.'

Jannaway would have liked to question him on the psychology of the matter, but Sheringham hastened away. It was a very hot morning, and in returning to Mr Bellingham's residence there was a convenient tavern to pass. He turned in to slake his thirst. This made a few minutes' delay; several more minutes were spent in traversing the rest of the distance; still more in communicating his information. Then there came a discussion as to the plan of campaign; finally, it was decided that the whole party should proceed to the house. The Home Secretary, who was nothing if not brave, would take upon himself the responsibility of seeking an immediate interview with Signor Vespucci and of explaining his reasons and conduct afterwards.

So they set out for the Villa Firenza, but when they came there no Jannaway was in sight. Instead, there approached them a small, sharp-featured boy who eyed them over with care.

'Is one of yer Mr Chenery?' he asked.

'Yes—I am Mr Chenery,' replied Jocelyn, stepping forward. 'What is it?'

The sharp-featured one produced a crumpled scrap of paper.

'A cove wot was 'angin' abaht 'ere just nah giv' me this 'ere scrap o' piper, guv'nor, sayin' as 'ow you'd be comin' along and I wos to give it to you, d' yer see?' he answered. 'He giv' me a bob, the cove did, and ses as 'ow you'd giv' me anuvver.'

'There you are, then,' said Jocelyn, and almost snatching the paper from the boy's grasp opened it hastily. 'Yes, it's from Jannaway,' he exclaimed. 'Listen—

> "The young lady, heavily veiled and evidently in a great hurry, has just left the house, making for Wellington Road way. I'm after her. I'll telephone as soon as possible to Mr Bellingham's: C.J."'

'Good Jannaway,' said Hadley. 'He's real smart.'

'Ring that bell again,' commanded the Home Secretary.

But at the end of several minutes there had been no response, and the young Minister grew impatient. He looked at the detectives.

'We might lift that boy over the wall and let him open the door,' said Follingsbee. 'It seems to be only on the latch.'

Would the boy consent to lend his assistance? The boy was willing to be lifted over every garden wall in the neighbourhood for half-a-crown, and said so. And so in another minute the little group entered the cool shades of Signor Vespucci's garden.

In that pleasant haunt of peace nothing seemed changed to the eyes familiar with it. Neither Jocelyn nor Hadley saw anything unusual or unexpected. The fountain was sending up scintillating rays of diamond-like light towards the warm sunlight and the overhanging trees; in the branches of the tall beech which overshadowed the low-roofed house, the doves which Pepita fed daily on the lawn were cooing plaintively. Everywhere the eye fell on bright masses of bloom and flower; the greenness and coolness of the lawn and the fragrance of the borders and hedges suggested anything but crime. And yet so much of mystery had centred about this place in the minds of most of the little group of men who now entered the garden that they spoke with hushed voices and moved towards the house with slow steps, as if they half expected something to happen.

The hall door stood wide open; within, a massive and ancient clock, which Jocelyn had often admired, was steadily ticking off the seconds. But all else was quiet—so quiet as to give an impression of solitude.

'There seems to be nobody about,' said one of the officers. He turned to Jocelyn and Hadley. 'You gentlemen know the place, I think?' he went on. 'You'd better lead the way.'

Hadley stepped through the hall with Jocelyn and the Home Secretary in close attendance. They looked into the rooms opening off the inner hall; each was empty. In one, which Jocelyn had not seen before, a breakfast-table was laid for four persons, but nothing upon it had been touched. In all these apartments, as in the outer and inner hall, there was the same strange silence.

'This is a strange thing,' said the Home Secretary, looking around him wonderingly. 'The place seems absolutely deserted, and yet—ah, what's that?'

From somewhere in some far-off corner of the house came a heavy thumping sound, as of blows being struck on a dull surface. The whole party instinctively turned to follow Hadley, who had at once made off in a direction from which the sound came. He hurried down one corridor; round a corner into another, and the repeated blows grew heavier and nearer.

'That's from the servants' quarter,' he said. 'I guess we're going to discover something.'

Passing through the folding doors at the end of the second corridor they found themselves in a small, brick-paved hall, out of which several doors opened. On the interior of one of these the blows were evidently being struck.

'There's somebody fastened up in there,' said Hadley. 'And the key's been left in the lock!'

Without more ado he turned the key and dragged open the heavy door of what was evidently a butler's pantry or strong room, lighted only by a small barred window set high in the further wall. And the opening of the door revealed five frightened-looking domestics, all women, three of whom were in tears and evidently on the verge of hysterics or collapse.

'What's all this?' demanded Hadley, as the foremost woman, obviously the housekeeper, emerged at the head of her flock. 'How did you get in there, and how long have you been in?'

‘Get there, sir, and how long?’ exclaimed the housekeeper, indignantly. ‘We seem to have been there an age, though it’s perhaps two hours. And as to how we got there, we were made to walk in at the end of Miss Pepita’s revolver! And I should like to know what it is that’s happening in this house this morning—something wicked, I’ll be bound, considering how we’ve been treated.’

‘Where is your master?’ demanded one of the detectives.

But the housekeeper knew nothing, nor did any of her staff. All they knew was that Miss Pepita assembled them in the little hall, in which they now stood, at half-past eight o’clock, on pretence of wishing to give them some instructions, and then, armed with a revolver, made them enter the strong room, where she locked them in. Nor did they know of anything that could have led up to such a procedure—the domestic machinery had rolled on smoothly and there was nothing unusual known. They knew that Dr Kressler and Mr von Schleinitz had been in the house all night and were remaining to breakfast, but more than that they did not know.

‘The laboratory!’ said Hadley. ‘Come along—it’s no use asking more questions now. Let’s get there.’

The garden at the rear of the house was as quiet as that in the front. The door of the laboratory was locked or bolted; it took some minutes for Follingsbee to find a crowbar in the tool-house close by; some further minutes to break the door open. When the sound of the splintered wood and riven bolts died away the silence was profound and the men entered gently, looking about them with expectant eyes. And suddenly the foremost of the party started back upon those who followed at their heels, pointing to something ahead with trembling fingers.

Three bodies lay on the floor—the bodies of Vespucci, of Kressler and of von Schleinitz. They appeared to have died as easily as innocent children go to sleep—and those who looked down in horror upon them knew that somehow they had met the same mysterious form of death that had come unawares upon the light-hearted revellers at the Hotel Petronia.

5

There was nothing to show how these men had met their deaths at first sight. Kressler lay reclining against a wall, which propped him up in a half-recumbent position; von Schleinitz looked as if he had suddenly sat down on the floor and dropped his head and shoulders forward: Vespucci had evidently fallen out of his wheeled chair and lay in a crumpled heap at the foot of the very operating table on which Jocelyn Chenery had seen the body of the vivisected dog strapped down. Except for the presence of the dead men the laboratory presented its usual appearance.

Suddenly Hadley, who had stooped down to look at each body, rose erect with a sharp exclamation.

'Look there!' he cried. 'And there! And there! This is a vendetta!'

He pointed first to Vespucci's forehead; then to Kressler's; then to von Schleinitz's. On each, immediately above and between the eyebrows, a curious mark had been incised with some sharp instrument. These marks had evidently been made after death, for though they were deeply cut very little blood flowed. They were just ugly, yet eloquent scarlet sign-manuals written by some implacable hand on the white, set faces.

'That's a sign of vengeance!' said Hadley. 'These men have been killed out of revenge. Here's more mystery.'

And suddenly, remembering what he had seen the previous night, he stooped and began hurriedly to divest Vespucci's body of some of its upper clothing. He rose up again with a smile of triumph.

'Ah, there, you see!' he exclaimed. 'That hump on his back was false! Great Heavens!—what further mystery is there? Say—we're just wasting time here. What did the girl leave the house for? Let's get back to Bellingham's and see if your man's telephoned yet, Chenery. These men are dead—we can do nothing in this place. We want that girl.'

Leaving some of the officers in charge of the villa the rest of the party went back to Bellingham's house, full of excitement over the events of the morning, and wondering what the next development was to be. So far, there had been no message from Jannaway. An hour passed and still no news came. The Home Secretary went off to Whitehall; everybody else of the party left the house; only Jocelyn and Hadley remained, having no other way of communicating with the valet. Noon arrived and they were still waiting. But it was not until an hour later that the telephone bell rang. Jocelyn hastened to it. He returned to Hadley and their host, looking a little mystified.

'Jannaway wants me to go down to the Hotel Mirador, Victoria, at once,' he said.

'Heard anything?' asked Hadley.

'He'll tell us all when we get there,' replied Jocelyn. 'He was somewhat ambiguous in his replies—only urged that we should go there at once and with an officer.'

'Then let's be off and pick up one of those plainclothes men at the villa,' said Hadley. 'The day's wearing.'

The Hotel Mirador proved to be a private hotel of foreign appearance in a busy street near Victoria. Jannaway, on the lookout for his master's arrival, signalled the car to stop a few doors away from the hotel entrance and led the three occupants up the street. He looked disappointed and had evidently lost some confidence.

'I'm afraid I've not done any good, sir,' he said, pausing at a corner from which the Hotel Mirador was clearly in view. 'I believe the young lady's given me the slip.'

'Tell him what's happened,' said Hadley.

Jannaway heard the news of the discovery, at the Villa Firenza with widening eyes and looked more disappointed than ever.

'I must be a fool!' he said. 'But really, sir, I don't know how she slipped me. I'll tell you all about it, but I'll keep my eye on that door while I talk, because I should know the young lady as I saw her this morning better than you would. You see, gentlemen, Mr Sheringham here hadn't left me many minutes when Miss Vespucci (I've seen her before, Mr Chenery, sir, so I know her very well) came out of the garden door in a good deal of hurry—at least, she was walking pretty fast for a lady and for such a hot morning. She was dressed very quietly—a blue serge coat and skirt, gentlemen—and

she'd a dark veil that hid her face a good deal, and she was carrying a Gladstone bag. She went off Wellington Road way, and it suddenly struck me that I'd better follow her, so I scribbled that note for you and went after. She got into a taxicab near Marlborough Road Station, and—'

'Did you remember to take it's number?' asked Sheringham, regarding the amateur detective with good-natured tolerance. 'I expect not, eh?'

'No, I didn't,' retorted Jannaway. 'Because I knew I shouldn't lose sight of it—not likely! I got into another and gave the driver my exact instructions through the tube. Well, gentlemen, the young lady was driven straight down here—no stopping anywhere, nor turning to right or left—and into that hotel I'll swear she went at exactly five minutes past ten-o'clock! And I'll take my solemn oath she's never come out since!'

'In that case,' said the professional detective, with a dry smile, 'you'd naturally expect her to be in there still. But from the looks of you I rather gather that you don't think she is.'

Jannaway tried to look injured at this suggestion, but only succeeded in looking crestfallen.

'I've kept as sharp a lookout on that door from the time she entered until now as a cat keeps on a mouse-hole,' he said. 'I know it's the only way into and out of the house. For the first hour or so I didn't mind waiting and I watched carefully who came out. There were some foreign-looking people, both men and women, but none like her, and there was a nun, or a Sister of Mercy, and a nurse with some children, and so on, but nothing like Miss Vespucci. And so at last I went in and asked for her.'

'Ah!' said the detective. 'Did you, now?'

'I made up a plausible tale, sir,' said Jannaway, regarding his master with a momentary flash of the eye. 'I said I'd got a parcel for Miss Vespucci from the jewellers and must deliver it myself. They didn't know any Miss Vespucci and I didn't expect they would. Then I described her, and they recognised the description as that of a young lady who had taken a room that morning, and at my request they went off to see if she was in, and—'

'And what would you have done if she had been in?' demanded Sheringham, sternly. 'You've no warrant to—'

'Let him finish,' interrupted Jocelyn. 'Go on. Jannaway.'

'Thank you, sir.' said Jannaway. 'They came back and said she wasn't in. I asked if they'd seen her go out—no, they hadn't, they said, but they didn't watch who went in or out; they'd something else to do. Then I said my er-

rand was highly important and would they see if she was in any of the public rooms. But she wasn't—and yet I'll swear she never left, sir, because I've never been away from the front of the place, and I used their telephone to communicate with you so that I could keep an eye on her.'

The detective eyed Jannaway with pity.

'You saw a nun or a sister of Mercy come out?' he said suddenly. 'Ah! Now what was she like?'

'Didn't see her face,' replied Jannaway, shortly.

'Ah, you'd never make one of us,' said Sheringham. 'Now, gentlemen, if you'll just wait about a few minutes I'll make some proper inquiries—my card'll take me anywhere.'

He moved off, full of conscious importance, greatly to the chagrin of Jannaway, who began to look more troubled than ever.

'Never mind, Jannaway,' said his master.

'You did your best, and she may be here yet.'

Sheringham was smiling when he came back. He wagged a fat forefinger at the valet.

'Ah, young man!' he said. 'You see what we regulars can do. I've seen the room which the young lady engaged, sir, and likewise her bag, which is in it. I also opened the latter.'

'Well?' said Jocelyn, impatiently. 'Well? Did you discover anything?'

Sheringham smiled a comprehensive smile.

'I did, sir,' he answered. 'I discovered a lady's tailor-made coat and skirt of dark blue serge; a toque, the materials of which I need not specify, and a thick veil, same as your young man there has described.'

Jannaway gasped.

'Then what—what does it mean?' he exclaimed.

'Ah, if you was one of us, young fellow,' replied the detective, indulgently, 'you would know what it means. What you took for a nun must have been the young woman you was after. There'd be no great difficulty about doing it, gentlemen,' he said, turning to the others. 'I never saw an easier place to get out of. The office is right at the end of the hall and the stairs are close to the front door. She'd nothing to do but change and then—hook it! And now I'll get on to the seaports and see if we can hear anything of a person answering the following description, etcetera, etcetera.'

But the night passed, and the day, and many nights and days, and no news came from anywhere. The Signorina Pepita Vespucci had vanished.

6

There was no disposition on the part of the Government to institute a vigorous search for Pepita. It was recognised that with the death of the three men whose bodies had been found in the laboratory at the Villa Firenza the reign of terror had passed away, and there was a tacit agreement on the part of all concerned to let that page of history be turned over for good. The vast majority of the people knew but little of the real truth of matters. Officialdom can suppress news when it likes, in spite of an unbridled press and half-penny papers, and it was not minded that too much should be known about the strange affair in St John's Wood. All that most people ever did know was that these foreign gentlemen, more or less concerned in scientific pursuits, had met a sudden death in the laboratory of one of their number, probably by inhaling the fumes of some chemical with which they were experimenting. Only a few persons connected their curious fate with the terror which had seized upon England for a brief spell, for the formal announcement that that terror was no more was sufficient for ninety-nine out of every hundred of the people. We are still a nation given to the cult of the nine-days' wonder—but the tenth finds us indifferent, apathetic, forgetful, pressing on to the next thing and careless of the past, whatever terrors the past would teach us.

But in the memories of those who had been more or less intimately connected with this strange affair the mystery of it remained fresh and green for a long time. Jocelyn Chenery and John Hadley were more puzzled by the disappearance of Pepita than by any other feature of the case. Certain things it was absolutely necessary to do and to clear up, for men who have relatives or friends cannot usually be removed from the earth as if they were of no account. The kinsfolk of Kressler and von Schleinitz came forward to claim them; nothing that was not creditable would be urged against these

two. But none came forward to represent whatever kinsfolk Vespucci had left. There was a considerable sum of money, quite a fortune in fact, in the hands of his bankers; in the house in St John's Wood there were pictures, books, instruments, objects of art, furniture, expensive wines which were worth many thousands of pounds, no one came forward to claim them. And those concerned often wondered if the name by which this man had gone was his real name, and if the girl who had passed as his niece had really stood in that relationship to him.

Those who had known the domestic affairs of the Villa Firenza were soon aware of one thing. Miss Pepita, whose wardrobe was as expensive as that of a prima donna of the music-halls, had taken nothing of it in her hurried flight; she had left the house with literally no more of clothing than that in which Jannaway had seen her depart. But she had taken whatever there was in the shape of jewellery and precious stones. Anybody who intimately knew the habits of uncle and niece was well aware that they possessed and habitually wore a wealth of pearls and diamonds—of these or of anything similar not a trace was to be found in the house or heard of at the bank. A magnificent diamond ring which Vespucci habitually wore had been removed from his finger; a safe which stood in his bedroom had been opened with a key, evidently taken from his pocket after his death. Who could have collected and carried away everything—the personal belongings and the diamonds in which the ransom for London had been paid (for no one in the secret doubted for a moment where that ransom had found its way)—but Pepita? And Pepita had vanished like a dewdrop in the sunlight. Some thought that she would be heard of in some gay city, queening it with the best, flaunting her enormous wealth. But Pepita remained hidden.

And things went on as things will go on, no matter what happens in this eventful world. A little more than a year after her father's death Lesbia Pontifex married Jocelyn Chenery, who about that time discovered that he had no great desire for a Parliamentary career and resolved, with his wife's entire approval, to henceforth live the life of a country gentleman, and to give little of his time to London and much to Somerbourne, where Lesbia had already established another herd of prize cattle, under the superintendence of Jermey and George Albert. And it was in the first autumn of their married life, and during a visit which Hadley and the bride he had recently espoused were staying with them, that the mystery of Pepita was finally cleared up and laid to rest forever—so far as they were concerned.

On a bright September evening Jocelyn and Hadley, who had been out partridge-shooting all day, were returning to the Manor when they saw an unfamiliar figure approaching the hall door from the direction of the carriage drive. Hadley paused, staring with his hand shading the sun from his eyes.

'Say!' said he, 'that's a Franciscan monk going to your door—I know them; I've seen them abroad. I guess you've some here in this country too, but they don't go about in their habits, I reckon.'

'Not usually,' said Jocelyn, gazing across the garden which lay between them and the house. 'And there's no monastery hereabouts.'

The brown-habited figure was at the hall door by that time. It was evidently approached and accosted from within; another moment and it had disappeared into the house.

Lesbia met her husband in the hall; her face and eyes expressed an unwonted surprise.

'There is an Italian monk waiting to see you, Jocelyn,' she said. 'He has come all the way from the extreme South, of Italy, specially to see you. He speaks English.'

She pointed to the door of the library as she spoke, and Jocelyn, leaving her and Hadley in the hall, went straight there, wondering why a Franciscan from so far away should come to him.

The monk, his cowl thrown back, stood patiently looking out upon the rose-garden. As Jocelyn entered the room and approached him he turned and made a grave, formal bow.

'Mr Chenery?' he said interrogatively.

Jocelyn bowed in his turn.

'I have the pleasure of receiving—' he said.

'A Franciscan, Mr Chenery, whose name and monastery are of no moment,' answered the monk. 'I have a mission to fulfil—permit me to fulfil it and then to depart. I am merely the bearer of a message—and of a packet to be delivered into your hands. Mr Chenery, you remember one who was in this world Pepita Vespucci?'

Jocelyn started at the suddenness of this question. He stared at the monk's deeply-lined, olive-tinted face, at the dark burning eyes fixed upon him with searching interest.

'Was Pepita Vespucci?' he exclaimed. 'Was? Is the Signorina then dead?'

‘Pepita Vespucci is dead to the world, Mr Chenery,’ replied the monk’s quiet voice. ‘She charged me with this mission to you—with the delivery of this letter and of this packet.’

From the folds of his habit he drew out a sealed envelope and a packet wrapped in linen and also heavily sealed. Jocelyn took them mechanically, wondering much as to what was meant by this strange episode in an otherwise prosaic day’s happenings.

‘I am to wait until you have read the letter, Mr Chenery, and to hear if you will send to her who was Pepita Vespucci the message she desires,’ said the monk.

‘I will read the letter at once,’ said Jocelyn. ‘In the meantime you will allow me to offer you some refreshment—indeed, I trust you will be our guest for the night, and—’

But the monk bowed and raised a deprecating hand.

‘Many thanks to you, Mr Chenery, but I must return to London by the evening train,’ he said. ‘And I had some refreshment in the village outside your park gates. I will rest until you have read the letter and examined the packet.’

Jocelyn carried the mysterious communication to his own room. He cut open the sealed envelope and drew out a sheet of thin notepaper. He recognised Pepita’s fine Italian hand; he had seen it before. He sat down at his desk and read.

> ‘Dear Mr Chenery,—This is the last communication I shall ever hold with the world. From tomorrow I shall be as one dead to it, for I then take the veil.
>
> ‘I am instructed—and indeed it is my wish to do so—that I must make confession of certain things of the past in which I was in some ways concerned, and more particularly in London. You will allow me to make this confession to you.
>
> ‘I ask you to let your mind go back to the night on which Valentine Rederdale died. After you and the American, Hadley, had left the house that night, I, by accident, learnt the secret of the three men—my uncle, Pietro Vespucci, Dr Kressler and Max von Schleinitz. I discovered their misuse of that awful secret which my father discovered years before; I also found out that they were the murderers of Valentine Rederdale, whose

death they insisted upon lest he should reveal anything of the existence of the ring which he brought from Paris. There were, as far as I afterwards could learn, but four of these rings in existence; they are hollow, and each had, at one time or another, been charged with the deadly ether which had the power of destroying all life within a given area instantaneously.

'You will forgive me for telling the intimate secrets of my heart? Although I was formally betrothed to Kressler, I had become fondly attached to Valentine Rederdale, and at a word from him I would have broken my engagement. When I discovered the truth about his death I had only one thought—of revenge.

'I found ways of making myself fully acquainted with all the doings of these three; it was easy, for they suspected nothing. I discovered Vespucci's double life. I got to know their plans. It was I who took care that you did not go to the Hotel Petronia by sending you a powerful drug which, as you know, put you to sleep. As Heaven is my witness I feel as if I were a murderess, for I could have saved the lives of those young men, but I was mad at that time with rage and desire for vengeance and could only think of glutting that desire. Yet I remembered you.

'Yes—I meant to kill Vespucci, Kressler and von Schleinitz myself! I admit it.

'The time I selected was the morning after the evening on which the ransom was paid over in diamonds to Vespucci. The two others were to come very late that night and to remain over breakfast. I know many things about subtle poisons, and that night I prepared one which I meant to give them in their coffee. They would not have detected its presence; they would have died in torment in a minute or two, but quite sensible and conscious, and I should have had time to triumph over them—but I must remember that henceforth I must have no more such thoughts in my heart.

'This revenge was not to be. They all went into the laboratory early; they did not come to breakfast. I used my own secret means of entrance. They were all dead. I do not know what had

happened, but I can think. By some accidental means they had released a spray of the fatal ether and succumbed to it.

'I collected everything of value in precious stones that I could. The diamonds paid by your Government were on Vespucci, many more, many pearls were in his safe. I carried everything away, making an escape in the garb of a nun, without difficulty. I came here to Italy, and a few days later deposited the jewels in a bank, where they have remained until today. I do not know what I meant to do, but I was mercifully taken very ill, and now that I am well again I have done with the world and have no more desire for it.

'I now send the jewels which I brought away from London to you. Those paid to Vespucci by your Government are in a separate washleather case, sealed with a black seal. They are just as I found them on his body. Those in a similar bag were in his safe. I do not know how he became possessed of them. What I conscientiously believe to be my own I have given over to the community to which I shall in future belong.

'It is my wish that you should give back to your Government the ransom extracted from them, and that the others should be sold for charity. This is the last wish of her who in the world was.

'PEPTA VESPUCCI.'

Jocelyn, carrying the letter and packet with him, went to Hadley and called him into a room in which they were alone. There he put the letter into the American's hand and watched him read it. And Hadley read it and his mouth grew very grim and his face set. He laid it down without comment.

'Have you opened the packet?' he asked.

'Not yet,' replied Jocelyn.

'I should like to see what is in the bag sealed with red,' said Hadley.

Jocelyn cut the strings and broke the seals. Within the cedar-wood box in which all this vast wealth was compressed were two bags of washleather. Jocelyn opened that with the red seal and shook out the glittering contents. Hadley gazed, and gazed, and at last swept the priceless things back into their receptacle.

‘I guess there are some of my brother Roy’s diamonds amongst that lot!’ he said. ‘But let that pass—I’ve a pretty sure notion now who killed him and we’ll let it rest at that. Yes, that’s a good idea—sell ’em for charity. Go and send the poor girl her message, Chenery—it seems to me we’re closing this chapter.’

Jocelyn went back to the library. The monk rose, waiting.

‘Say,’ said Jocelyn, ‘say to her who sent you that her wishes shall be obeyed to the letter.’

The monk bowed and moved towards the door, swiftly, silently.

‘And say, too,’ said Jocelyn, following him, ‘that I hope that in the new life she speaks of she will find happiness.’

The monk turned.

‘And forgetfulness,’ he said, and vanished.

Jocelyn went back to Hadley and found him, hands in pockets, staring at the washleather bags. Without a word Jocelyn made up the packet again, sealed it and placed it in a safe. He slammed the door with a click and Hadley started from a reverie.

‘Yes!’ he said. ‘Yes, Chenery, I guess that chapter is closed!’